

# A THOUSAND DOORS

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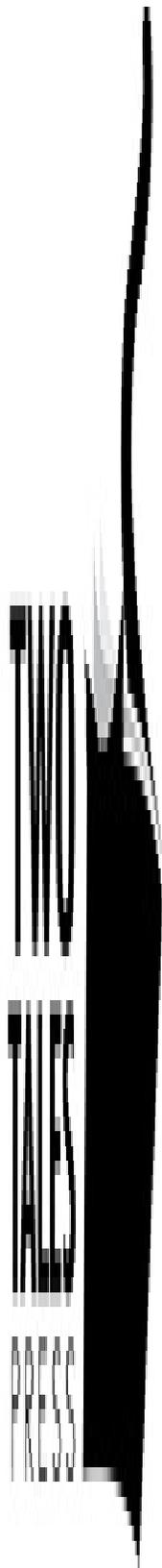
A  
THOUSAND  
DOORS

AN ANTHOLOGY OF MANY LIVES

EDITED BY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

J.T. ELLISON



*A Thousand Doors*

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[\*The Day She Died\*](#) 5

[\*The Murder\*](#) 9

[\*What Could Have Been\*](#) 26

[\*The Happily Married Wife and Mother\*](#) 27

[\*The Author\*](#) 49

[\*The Lawyer\*](#) 75

[\*The Archaeologist\*](#) 104

[\*The Homeless Woman\*](#) 128

[\*The Spy\*](#) 149

[\*The Actress\*](#) 170

[\*The Suicide\*](#) 196

[\*The Primatologist\*](#) 220

[\*The Senator's Wife\*](#) 245

[\*The Professor\*](#) 265

[\*The News Anchor\*](#) 290

[\*The Seeker\*](#) 311

[\*The Singer/Songwriter\*](#) 334

[\*The Widow\*](#) 357

[\*What Is\*](#) 377

[\*All Her Lives\*](#) 378

[How It Ends 383](#)

[Mia. Just, Mia 384](#)

[A Note from the Editor 387](#)

[Contributors 389](#)

*“Death hath a thousand doors to let out life.”*  
—*Massinger*

# THE DAY SHE DIED

J.T. ELLISON

**T**HE DAY MIA JENSEN DIED dawned cold and harsh under a brittle sun that barely warmed the streets. Clouds like frothy ash never released their hold on the sky, and people were angry with each other and the world. It was that sort of day, the kind when nothing is right, everything is wrong, and people long for evening, for the gentle cradle of their beds and dreams. *Ah, well. Tomorrow is another day*, they said to one another, nodding, everyone a sage, everyone holding out that small bit of hope that yes, tomorrow would be a new day, tomorrow can and will bring something new and better and good to our lives.

This was not the case for Mia.

For Mia, there was no warm, soft bed and chirpy dreams, no reading of the latest chapter of the latest book, no brushing of teeth or braiding of hair or relaxing soak in the tub before slipping into pajamas. No glass of red wine with dinner, pot roast started in the slow cooker before she left the house, with multicolored carrots and potatoes because eating the colors of the rainbow will make her healthy. No trip to the gym after work to burn off the calories of lunch and the frustrations of her day. No texts to friends about cocktails, no kisses, no hugs. No sex on the desk. No shrugging off camel-hair

coats in the green room, no powder and pancake before the 3 p.m. promo slot.

None of it, because at 8:03 p.m., after unexpectedly quitting her lawyer's office and fleeing to the ironic safety of her home, Mia Jensen was stabbed to death in her kitchen.

The question, outside of why did this happen, obviously, is thus: Does Mia even care that she won't experience these things? That her day was interrupted by the edge of a knife? You might even ask her: Mia, if you knew you were going to die today, what would you think?

A good run?

Too much left to do?

You blew it, sister?

We are rarely ready to leave this world, but when the sameness rears its awful head, one may wonder, is it even worth it? The existential crisis that comes for us all at one point or another—what is the point of this life?

Mia was experiencing that very crisis the day she died.

There was a sameness to her days that bred a desultory disinterest in her surroundings. Her habits, her work, her friends and family, her life was repeating itself, touchstoning again and again: wake, prep dinner, go to work, the gym, cocktails, eat, bathe, sleep. Mia was bored. Dissatisfied. Unhappy.

She thought it was Keats who said *sameness breeds jealousies*, but lately she'd been seeing it as *sameness breeds mediocrity*, in those memes that float around on the social media networks and showed up in her email from well-meaning friends who think they're intellectual but are really just boring proselytizers who don't even know what mediocrity means without right-clicking and looking it up and certainly haven't read Keats, though they have a point. Mediocrity is what she's been feeling for quite some time, and she's too embarrassed by this to discuss it with her friends who do understand her lassitude and might even counsel her in how to shake her self-imposed constrictions.

All the decisions of her life, all the *what ifs*, the *what about this*, the *if only I had*, the *I should*; the missed flights and near miss accidents; loves and deaths and tears and joy; the opportunities lost and found, the chances taken and not; the smile on the train that led to the date that led to the ring; the sense of

being trapped, of running, of drowning; every moment of every day since she was born has led her to this moment, the moment of her death. *There but for the grace of God go I*—Mia thought too many times to count, seeing the homeless woman on the street, the tattooed teenager sulking on the stoop, the over-Botoxed Klingon forehead drinking wine across the table, the bedraggled gray-rooted woman with no ring and four screaming children in the grocery line—all the things she’s grateful not to have become. And just as often, the wishes—the graceful author whose book she’d had signed last week, the witty astrophysicist she spoke with last year who’d developed a new interpretation for black holes, the blond archaeologist with her booming laugh that she met in a hotel bar, the delicate actress, bones like bird wings, who was trying on clothes in Barneys.

Regrets. Joys. Mistakes. So many lives to lead, to have led. So many lives to lose, and so many to gain.

At 8:03 this evening, the seesaw of Mia’s years of *could have, should have, would have, did* finally collided.

The day Mia Jensen died, she finally got to live.

# THE MURDER

J.T. ELLISON

THE ROOM WHERE WE'RE MEETING is far from silent. You'd think a divorce lawyer's office would be quiet, grave, but this place is as bad as the newsroom where I work. In the newsroom, there are varying degrees of noise at all times, from the clacking of keyboards to the shouts of the reporters fighting with editorial, copy, sources, each other. Even after hours, in the dark of the night, the whine of the heater is a mosquito in my ear, the buzz of the fluorescent lights that are never turned off.

The lawyer's offices too are pulsing, buzzing. As if they know what is about to happen. As if they know who is sitting in that glass conference room. They can't, of course. Only Roger and I know the whole truth about why we're here today. But when the story comes out...

We are going to be celebrities, of a sort. Our names and faces will be splashed across the newspapers and evening news. I'm taking a leave of absence from work to prepare for the onslaught. I've filed for divorce, trying to get ahead of things. And if I'm asked, I will absolutely agree to testify.

Which is why I'm here, at Core and Core, giving my deposition in order to secure the decree of divorce. Trying to, at least. The fervor outside the conference room doors has grown so loud my lawyer, Chris Core, sends his

paralegal a look that has her scampering out the door to implore the masses to quiet down.

I spin in my chair and stare out the window. The conference room, on the twentieth floor of the Pinnacle Building, has a nice view of the Shelby Street Bridge and the AT&T Building—fondly referred to as the Batman Building. The clouds are low; there is fog around the spires. Nashville is a lovely town, a growing town, but I'm probably going to be bailing, because once the trial is done, and he goes to jail, or is forced to make reparations, or whatever, I am getting the hell out of Dodge and never looking back.

So many mistakes I've made. So many people hurt. How did I come to this point? How did I screw up so magnificently? I mean, I'm here, giving this deposition, in the hopes that down the road, I won't have to do jail time. I will agree to testify against my husband—can't call him my ex yet, the paperwork won't be final for another few weeks—which will be seen as the ultimate betrayal. I am the ultimate betrayer. Roger is furious with me for not helping him cover his tracks. He can't believe I'm divorcing him instead of helping him.

I could have. I'm good with money. When I discovered what he was up to, I could have very easily concocted a few stories, opened a few accounts, moved some things around, and gotten the company back on its feet. I would have had to use my entire life savings to pay back the coffers and get Roger someplace safe, then follow him in a year or two, but I could have done it.

But I'm not.

Because I can't bring myself to do it. I don't have the heart to make things right for him. He hasn't had my heart for a very long time, and when all this happened, I felt like I'd awoken from a very long nap to realize not only am I no longer in love, I don't like my husband very much.

Turns out my college sweetheart, Roger Bannon, handsome, preppy, never-met-a-stranger Roger Bannon, is running a massive Ponzi scheme inside of his company, Focus for Friends. FFF's mission is to deliver donated home and housing materials to poor and indigent families after disasters abroad. Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, fires—FFF trucks show up alongside the big boys and pass out donated items. You know how it works: They take in clothes and home goods, ship them to places people need them. The company

is doing good work. Important work. Work I was proud to be associated with, even tangentially, through my husband.

Except...as I discovered last week, a lot of donations come in the form of money, which Roger, the jerk, has been stealing, investing, and promptly losing, so he had to “help” the company bank accounts along with regular supplements from the company kitty to the tune of over \$5.4 million last year alone.

My beautiful car, my beautiful house, my beautiful clothes—empty and meaningless in the face of FFF’s mission, honestly—are no longer mine. Yes, the irony of me having all these lovely things while people across the world starve, live without shelter, is not lost on me. I justify it—Roger justifies it, too—by saying we have to keep up appearances, even though I have a creeping sense of hypocrisy every time I slam closed the door of my Mercedes.

I honestly had no idea Roger was embezzling from the company. Thankfully, I’ve never been involved in the day-to-day, only show up at events when asked, and do interviews or photo shoots as needed. I’m a reporter, I have my own job. That’s what’s saved me, why I’m giving this deposition today. There is no proof I had any knowledge of Roger’s actions. If we’re officially divorced, I can testify. And then I can write the real story behind the collapse of my marriage.

But of course, since it’s my husband who will be dragged through the mud, everyone will assume I was fully cognizant of his wicked ways. They will assume we shared a bed, confidences, bank accounts. They will look knowingly at the house and the clothes and the Mercedes, and think I was complicit in his actions.

I’m not. And we don’t share anything. Haven’t in ages. Thank God I listened to the priest who counseled us before we married who told me to keep my money separate from Roger’s. It pissed him off to no end when I insisted on separate accounts, but it’s going to save me now.

Hence my leave of absence from the paper, and my presence here at Core and Core today, facing off against the stranger who’s shared my bed for the past fifteen years.

The paralegal comes back in, face ashen.

“There’s a fire on the fifth floor.”

Chris stands quickly, papers spilling on the floor. “Why isn’t the alarm going off? Are we being evacuated? Is that’s what all the noise is about?”

“No. They just want us to be aware. We’re fine to continue.”

“I’m going to check. I’ll be right back. Excuse me, Mia, Roger. Don’t, ah... yes.”

Chris leaves, the paralegal on his heels, and it’s just us. Me, and Roger, who turns to me with the most pleading, puppy-dog look I’ve ever seen in his eyes.

“Don’t do it, Mia. Please. Don’t. Don’t do this.”

“You shouldn’t have cheated all those people, Roger,” I say, primly.

The puppy dog is gone in a flash, replaced by the growling junkyard dog I know lives just beneath the surface. “I’ll tell them it was you,” he hisses.

“You’re such a prince. Go ahead. The FBI will believe me. A jury will, too.”

“You’re a bitch,” he growls, leaning across the table. “Do you know that?”

“I try.” I smile blandly and look out the window again.

His tone changes, becomes wheedling again. “Honey—”

“I am not your honey. I can’t do this anymore, Roger. Please stop. You screwed up, and you’re going to have to pay the price.”

Still on his feet, his hand to his heart, he postures perfectly, as if he knows people are watching from outside the glass room. “What do you mean, you can’t do this anymore? I am your husband. This is too important for you to get on your high horse of morality. They could send me to jail. *Jail*, Mia. The company will collapse. Think of all the people we help, no longer clothed or sheltered because the company goes under.”

“You should have thought about that before you bought that Porsche.”

He kneels at my side. I can see the restraint it’s taking for him not to punch me. People are watching, I can see the reflections of bodies in the window. Roger looks for all the world like a grieving husband. I know better.

“Mia, you can’t tell them the truth. Please. You have to help me.”

“No.”

He looks at me like I’m mad, then. Crazy. Insane. *Ungrateful*.

This little morality play angers me, and I am suddenly furious, overwhelmed.

I am the linchpin in this operation. Without me, without my accusations and testimony, the entire case against him *could* fall apart. But I refuse to lie. I refuse to play this game any longer. Let him crash and burn.

I start from the room. He grabs my arm, and I yank it back.

“Don’t you dare touch me.”

“Mia, let’s talk. You’re clearly upset.” He is reasonable. I look like the villain. I don’t care.

“No. It’s too much. I don’t want this. I don’t want this life. This isn’t me. I hate living like this. Lying to everyone. Lying to myself. I hate what you’ve done. I hate you, Roger. I hate everything about you.”

I grab my bag and I’m out the door, heart hammering in my throat, ignoring the stares, the gasps. Tears burn in my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. I am not a crier. I can’t be seen as weak. I can’t.

I ignore my ringing phone and drive around the downtown blocks until I calm down. Left at the corner. Left at the diner. Left at the church. Left at the Starbucks.

If Roger looks out the window, he will see me driving in squares and think I’m even more stupid. Because he has to think I am an utter idiot to go along with him.

I pull up in front of the Pinnacle again. The valet smiles hopefully. I shake my head and his brows collide, confused by my reluctance to depart my vehicle.

I can’t bear the idea of Roger’s cheating, his lying, how he’s been covering things up, a moment longer. I realize I’ve made the decision almost at the same moment my hand finds the burner phone I bought last week when I started contemplating what I needed to do to make things right. Without a second thought, I send the text to my editor at the paper. Words that will bring down a company, a marriage, a life.

My life.

**Roger Bannon is embezzling funds from FOCUS FOR FRIENDS.**

*Ding.*

It’s sent, and received.

My heart is racing. I feel faint. What have I done?

*Home. Go home.*

Another place rife with emotion, but I can't just drive around pissed all day.

Waving away the valet, I squeal out into the street. Three blocks away, I wipe and toss the burner in a dumpster behind the new diner on Demonbruen, then drive west, out of downtown.

Ten minutes later, I slam through the door from the garage into the kitchen of my rented cottage. I throw my bag on the counter, grab my laptop, and head to the living room. On the couch, I flip open the screen and start searching.

Has it been announced? Does anybody know? Has the Justice Department raided the company headquarters yet?

My heartbeat ticks down a notch as I look. No word has leaked. Nothing is out there.

*Don't be silly, Mia. It will take them a few days to follow up. It was an anonymous text. It was a massive allegation.*

I take a deep breath. Shut my eyes. Shut the laptop. Blow out my breath hard and fast. Lion's breath, my yoga teacher calls it. Strangely, it does help me feel better. Stronger.

I look around the room. I moved in two months ago when I realized I needed to get as far away from Roger as I could, and it's still sparsely decorated. It's not home. Not really.

The house is eerily quiet. It's rare for me to be home at this hour. I can hear the ticking of the pipes, the whirring of the heater, everything so loud and unfamiliar, echoing through the empty space. The morning sun normally spills in the windows, warm and happy, but today is gray, cold and remorseless. The chill permeates my skin even though inside, I am churning. A bath. A book. Something, anything, to help me relax.

Like that's going to happen. Oh, I screwed up. I screwed up so badly. Why did I send the paper an anonymous text? I should pick up the phone. I should face this head-on. I should admit what I know, what he's asked of me. I am a coward. I can't do it.

Back in the kitchen, I grab a glass, fill it with filtered water, drink it down. The phone rings, and I dive toward it, recognizing the number. It is my best friend, Olivia.

“Mia, are you okay?”

“Word’s out then?”

“Word’s out about what?”

“Oh, um, nothing.” No, I haven’t told Olivia what’s going on. She knows I moved out, obviously, but when she asked why I simply said, “We’re having problems. I’ll explain more when I can.”

“Honey, are you okay? Roger called me, asked me to talk to you. What’s going on? He said you filed for divorce. Why didn’t you tell me?”

The accusatory tone in her voice makes me edgy. What can I even tell her without getting her involved?

*Roger is asking me to do something illegal, he’s a criminal who’s going to take us all down if I don’t stop him.*

*I am miserable. Every decision I’ve ever made was the wrong one. I don’t want to be living this life.*

*I want to blow up my world and dance on the ashes.*

“I just... I’m not happy. You know that. I need a change.”

She sighs, and I can envision her riotous black curls bobbing. “I understand. I really do. I know you haven’t been happy. But you may have taken it too far. Filing for divorce...are you sure that’s wise? He isn’t the sort to take kindly to being defied. God, is there someone else? I don’t think he’d be happy...I mean, it could go badly.”

Olivia has no idea about the text. None of them do. Not yet. She’s just babbling, and making excuses, maybe trying to protect me, I don’t know. There is something she knows that no one else is privy to.

Roger is violent sometimes. Violent with me. Oh, he never leaves a mark, but he’s excellent at manhandling me, intimidating me, scaring me. Emotional abuse is his forte. It’s only a matter of time until he graduates to using those clenched fists he shakes in my face.

Which is why, when I found out about his ridiculous scheme, I realized I finally have a chance. My only chance to get away from my perfect life.

He let me move out. He gave me space. He let me make the appointment with the lawyer. All to ensure my silence.

But now, I’ve talked. Even though no one knows it was me, Roger will.

I shiver. “‘It could go badly’ is an understatement. But I have to do this. I

have to get some perspective.”

Olivia sighs, and I feel her confusion. I can tell she wants to drag the whole story out of me, inch by inch, but I’m not ready to talk. Good friend that she is, she doesn’t push me. Instead, she says, “Have some wine. Watch some TV. Tomorrow is a new day. You’ll feel better once you get a good night’s sleep. You haven’t been sleeping or eating right. You’re stressed. I can talk to Roger for you, tell him—”

“No. Absolutely not. You stay far away from him, Olivia. Lives are at stake. My whole life is at stake. A good night’s sleep is not going to fix this. But you need to stay out of it, far, far away, okay?”

“I just think if the three of us could talk—”

The tears come hot and unconstrained. “You, of all people... You, who knows everything he’s done to me. You want to broker talks with that shithead? I...I have to go.”

I do. I am being betrayed in all corners today.

Olivia laughs, a strained squeak. “Seriously, Mia. Get some rest. Get some sleep. You may feel differently tomorrow. I could come over, bring you some soup or something? And we can talk about the best way to approach him.”

I get the sense that she’s only offering because she should, which makes me wonder why, exactly, she’s so damn interested in reconciliation talks.

Best she stays away. “No, thanks. I need to be alone.”

“Call me if you change your mind.”

She hangs up, and I’m left alone again, standing in my kitchen in the chilly air, fuming, staring out the window. The cat twines around the door, tail up, elegant and seductive, glancing over her shoulder like she’s draped in pearls and I’m a wealthy stranger to be conquered. I can practically see her wink.

Today, I am a stranger to her. To me. To my whole life.

When is the last time someone looked at me with adoration in their eyes? The last time I was thanked, celebrated, recognized? The last time I was asked to do something that made me proud?

What is a life? What is enough?

I ask this of myself often. Mia, what are you doing with your life? Are you following your dreams? Are you giving back to society? Are you living up to your potential? Are you happy? Are you proud of yourself?

Today, the answer is easy. No. No, I am not happy. I am not content. I am not living my best life. I'm scraping along, forced to compromise myself to help someone else's bottom line. To hide the truth. Right now, it sucks to be me.

What is it they say: If you don't pursue your own dreams, someone will pay you to pursue theirs?

Yuck.

That little voice pipes up, the nasty one who loves to remind me of my failures.

*You're a soon-to-be-middle-aged woman with the start of a drinking problem and nothing meaningful to show for your life. You might even get to celebrate your big birthday in jail!*

Once, I had so many dreams. So many opportunities. I could have been a painter—I was a decent painter when I was young. I could have lived in France. I could have gone to Africa. I was always good at science, I could have spent time digging in the dirt, or teaching. I'm a decent teacher. Or acting, or singing...

*I could have had a baby...*

*It's not too late...*

“Oh, get over yourself. It's not like you can choose another life now. You're stuck with this one.”

I tidy the kitchen from breakfast, putting away my teacup and toast plate, then pour a glass of wine and head upstairs to my bath. This house was recently renovated, marble, grays and whites. It is calming, soothing. I enjoy the gentle, embryonic warmth, lying there drinking my wine, thinking about all the ways my life has gone wrong, all the paths I could have taken but didn't, until the water cools. I put my hair in a bun, get into a pair of yoga pants and a long-sleeve T-shirt.

If I'm playing hooky, I might as well try to enjoy myself.

There is freedom in what I've done. I have choices now, choices I didn't have before. Leaving Roger, leaving his situation, isn't something I take lightly. It will have consequences, serious, long-lasting consequences. Especially since I'm bringing down the house with me.

Downstairs, I refill my wineglass and see my phone has eight texts and three

missed calls, all work related. A couple of reporter friends asking why I've taken leave, is everything okay? My editor, his voice sounding strange, asking me to come by the office as soon as I'm able.

I know what that's about. Nope. Not gonna do his job for him.

I turn off the ringer and shove my phone into a kitchen drawer, make a bowl of popcorn, grab the bottle of wine. In front of the television, I pull up a movie. *Pearl Harbor*. Plenty of bombs and tears. Hours of enjoyment ahead. Perfect.

The movie distracts me. Wine two leads to wine three, then four. Hours later, I am zoned out, a little drunk, and still furious and scared about what tomorrow holds. Drunk before dinner. Classy. The thought makes me giggle.

It is almost 8 p.m. when I hear the noise. Like a knock, only quieter. I hit Pause. Nothing. Silence winds around me.

The cat, most likely, mugging around in the kitchen, playing with a fake mouse.

I wipe my eyes once more time. Stretch my legs. Hear it again, louder now. The small crash makes my heart leap to my throat.

That is not the cat.

Adrenaline floods my system. It's impossible to hear, see. I stand on unsteady legs, my heartbeat raging, the wine making me blurry.

"Who's there?" I call, but my voice is more like a whisper, weak with fear. I move toward the kitchen, even though my mind is screaming *Run, run and hide!* I am unarmed. I am buzzed. I am scared. Why didn't I take that self-defense class they were offering at work? Why didn't I take one of Roger's guns with me when I left?

My phone. Where is my phone?

*In the drawer in the kitchen, you idiot.*

I edge into the kitchen, seeing no one. The glass door to the deck is wedged open, shards on the floor by the eat-in cafe table.

And at that table sits Roger.

"What the hell are you doing? Did you break in?" *Stupid question, Mia. Of course he broke in. You are in so much trouble.*

He smiles, feral, head tipped to one side, the odd look he was getting before I broke it off. I don't know him anymore.

“You shouldn’t have walked out on me. You made a scene. It was distasteful.”

“You shouldn’t have asked me to break the law. Get out of here, Roger, or I’ll call the police.”

“You won’t.” He drums his fingers on the table, and I am reminded of all the mornings he sat across from me, reading the paper, turning with his left hand, the right drumming, drumming, drumming, endlessly.

I turn for my phone but he’s up in a flash, hand circling my biceps, thumb pressing hard into the flesh.

“Let me explain how this is going to go. We are going to fix everything. And if it’s not working, we will find someone to blame. A board member, a secretary. But either way, Mia, we are going to walk away from this, hand in hand. Do you understand?”

I try to wrench away, but he has a good hold on me. “And if I don’t agree? What if I don’t want to put myself on the line for you anymore? What if I don’t want to lie for you?”

His smile is lazy, crooked. On another man it would be sexy as hell. Once, it might have felt like that to me. But now, it feels like a threat.

I will not let him bully me anymore.

“It’s too late.”

The smile fades. “What do you mean, it’s too late?”

I just stare at him. Realization dawns in his eyes, and his face rips into a sneer.

The flash of the blade is so brief I don’t even have time to register more than a second’s fear before it sinks deep into my flesh, over and over, and I know I’m screaming, but I can’t hear anything.

---

It is dark, deeply dark, black as velvet. The edges of my darkness curl back, leaving a thin white line between them. It takes forever to realize my eyes are open. I am wet. The pain in my stomach and chest is excruciating.

The phone is ringing. It rings loudly, so loud I can feel it inside my skull.

This might be my only chance. The phone is in the drawer. If I can just reach it...

I drag myself a few feet across the floor. The pain makes me retch, the

retching makes me cry, the crying makes the pain magnify until I can hardly breathe.

I can't reach the drawer pull. The pain is too severe.

A voice in my head, not mine. *You're going to die if you don't answer the phone, Mia.*

I reach higher, but it's no use. I can feel the edges of my vision darkening.

*Mia, reach. Try harder. You can do it. You have to answer the phone.*

My shoulder feels like it's going to crack apart from my body, but I get a hand on the drawer pull. Blood makes it slick, and it takes a few tries for me to get it open, then reach inside. The phone falls on the floor and skids toward the cat's water bowl.

I manage to press the green button.

"Mia? It's Olivia. I wanted to apologize—"

"Help," I say, before everything goes black.

---

There are flashes.

My body, jostled. Pain, so intense and swift I want to cry out, but no sound comes from my mouth, only a scream from deep inside, waxing and waning as I struggle to catch my breath. I can't breathe. I am drowning.

A voice, so faint, so weak. "Charging. Hit her again. Who did this to you, sweetheart? Did you recognize him?"

The light is bright, so bright, and I see something in the distance, something gray and amorphous. I feel fear. I feel numb.

I feel peace.

"Come with me," the strange light says, holding out a shadowed hand. Its grip is warm and soft, and I relax into the fog, listening as the light, the entity, the being, the angel, says, "You've always wanted to know what might have been. You need to see how important your choices are. I will show you."

WHAT  
COULD  
HAVE  
BEEN

# THE HAPPILY MARRIED WIFE AND MOTHER

KIMBERLY BELLE

“DADDY, DADDY, LOOK!” OUR DAUGHTER, Hartley, stands in the middle of the front yard in a pajama top and a hot-pink tutu. Her hair is a wild snarl around her head, an equal mix of corkscrew curls and pillow-frizzed fluff. Yesterday was her fourth birthday, and she’s still riding the sugar high, bouncing on the grass like a Mexican jumping bean. She turns to her father and beams. “I can do a cartwheel. Watch!”

Sam tosses his keys in the truck. “I’m watching, baby. Show me what you got.” He should have left for the restaurant ten minutes ago, just like I should be wrangling the kids inside, getting them fed and dressed for school, but then again, we’re the Mastersons, and punctuality isn’t exactly our strong suit.

I sink onto the front steps, and her brother, Ford, climbs onto my lap. He knows his sister, and he knows we’re going to be here a while.

Under her father’s undivided gaze, Hartley sparkles with self-importance. I may be the woman who tucks her in bed at night, who clothes and feeds her, who dries her tears and kisses the pain from her knees when she falls, but above all things, she craves the approval of her father.

She swings her arms high above her head, points a grubby toe into the grass, and executes a fairly decent cartwheel. She's barely back on her feet when she swirls around to face him, a gymnast awaiting her score. From the other side of the truck, Sam claps and cheers. A ten.

Ford burrows deeper into my chest, sucking his thumb. He came out of the crib cranky this morning, and I press a palm to his forehead, feeling what might be a slight fever. Another molar pushing through, maybe, or the beginnings of a cold. A flicker of worry flashes in my chest. My son may have recovered from last winter's bout with the croup, but I haven't. In a burst of energy he wriggles free, and I watch him toddle across the grass to his big sister.

Five years ago, if you'd asked me what I wanted from my life, I would have said not this—not kids, not a barely profitable restaurant and a mortgage tying me to this Southern Georgia town, definitely not Sam. But if there's one thing I've learned in life, it's that plans don't always work out the way you think they will.

Across the street, the garage peels open, and our neighbor Sarah Jean steps out in high-heeled sandals and her Lilly Pulitzer du jour, a cell phone pressed to an ear. Her tan legs are lotioned into a high shine, reflecting in the early morning sun like glass; her hair is heat-curled for business. Sarah Jean is Ellaville's top-selling real estate broker, the ringleader of a clique of former mean girls turned ruthless negotiators, a group Sam and I jokingly refer to as the bubble-gum mafia.

She drops her phone into a giant chartreuse handbag and calls to us across the street, "I need to fill y'all in on the plans for the new sign at the neighborhood entrance before the meeting tonight, but I've got to run. Rotary meeting. Do you think y'all can come over fifteen minutes early?"

There is only one appropriate response to her question, and that is a yes. Even though I have no idea what she's talking about. Even though Sam and I will not be coming over fifteen minutes early for anything.

But Sam takes the bait. "What meeting?"

Sarah Jean's brown eyes go pony wide. "The neighborhood association meeting? Eight o'clock?" When we don't respond, she punches a fist into a bony hip. "Don't tell me y'all forgot."

Sarah Jean is everything I hate about the South—her unnecessarily pink wardrobe, how she can report me for some silly infraction and call me sweetie in the same breath, the way I may never refer to her as Sarah or Jean, only Sarah Jean. She will never accept me into her ranks, mostly because she will never forgive me for snatching Sam out from under the noses of all her single girlfriends, women who still gather at the restaurant every Friday night to watch Sam work his magic in the kitchen.

“See you tonight,” I call out and shoot Sam a look: *Zip it.*

“Watch me again, Daddy!” Hartley screams, springing to her feet, and Sam looks glad for the distraction.

He glances at his watch. “Baby, I gotta go. I got a shipment of fish arriving any minute now.”

“Please? Just one more time. This one’s the best, I promise.”

“Fine,” Sam says, leaning on the cab with both forearms. “But just one. I mean it this time.”

Everybody here knows Sam doesn’t mean it, including Ford, who plops onto his diapered tush to watch his sister do not one but three sloppy cartwheels across the grass. Sam watches his daughter, and I watch Sam, warmth swirling in my chest. He may not have been my first choice, but I see now that he was the *only* choice. Funny how hindsight can do that, shine a light on all the mistakes, magnify all the twists and turns that led me right here, right now. The exact place I want to be.

I smile. “You’re going to ruin her for all men, you know that, right? No one else will ever be good enough.”

He flashes me a grin. “That’s the goal. Make it so she never wants to leave.”

“No, that’s *not* the goal. The goal is to raise three human beings who are happier, healthier, and more emotionally mature than their mother.”

Sam laughs, then freezes. His smile sticks to his face. “What did you just say?”

“I said that’s not the goal. I said that our kids are supposed to be better than us.”

He shakes his head. That’s not the answer he was looking for, of course it wasn’t. He slams the truck door and stalks across the yard, pulling me to my feet with one smooth tug. “Three?”

I nod. Sam would love nothing more than to fill this old house with kids. Looks like he's going to get his wish.

"Since when?" His arm encircles my back, and I catch a whiff of shampoo and coffee.

"Since seven weeks, five days." I shrug. "Give or take."

Somewhere behind him, Ford starts to cry, and Hartley soothes him with promises of pancakes with extra blueberries I don't have time to whip up, what with fish coming and school waiting and all of us hopelessly late. But my husband bends me over an arm and kisses me like we've got all day.

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It's well past nine by the time I swing my battered 4Runner into the Peachtree Academy lot. Hartley leans forward in her booster seat, craning her neck to see out the window, her little shoulders falling at the empty asphalt. The carpool line is long gone, the teachers already disappeared inside.

"We're late, Mommy. *Again.*" Hartley is my clock keeper, mostly because I never keep an eye on the clock. She wriggles out of her seat belt and springs onto the floor of the back seat, reaching for her backpack. "Ooh, Miss Sally is going to be so mad."

*Miss Sally is just going to have to chill*, I think, but I hold my tongue. We're only a few minutes late, and besides, Hartley is four. What's she going to miss—calculus?

I unhook my phone from the charger and drop it in my bag. "Unbuckle your brother," I say while my daughter whines for me to hurry up, hurry up, hurry up.

I open the door and she flies out, her little feet churning up the grass. I unhook Ford from his car seat and lift him out of the car. "Don't forget his backpack," Hartley screams over her shoulder, and I reach back in for his bag. I was totally going to forget his backpack.

Peachtree Academy is a one-story stone-and-stucco building squatting in the middle of a pristine lawn, a place that is exactly as pretentious as its name. Crimson gables. Stained-glass windows. Shrubs that are always in bloom. At four grand per child, it's more than Sam and I can afford, but his parents foot the bill. I fought them on it for a while—despite its scholarly ambitions, this place is just a glorified day care—but I'm no match for Sam's father, a hotshot

criminal attorney. It wasn't long before his sweet-talking wore me down.

The hallway is quiet when we push through the door, only Miss Kristen behind the receptionist's desk, the preschool version of a bouncer. "Hartley just flew by here," she says, pointing down the hallway toward her classroom. "I already signed y'all in."

I smile my gratitude. "You're a star, thanks. I owe you one." Actually, I owe a lot more than one. We're late at least once a week, and unlike Miss Sally, Kristen has never given me shit for it.

I head down the hallway as somewhere in the bottom of my bag, my cell phone tinkles out a melody I try to ignore. By now Ford is wrapped around me like a monkey, a precursor to the meltdown that's coming. Some days he scuttles happily out of the car without looking back, others it's a screaming shit show. I never know which it will be until I pull up to the school.

"You're going to have so much fun today," I say, trying to peel a sticky arm from around my neck. "And it's a gorgeous day. I bet you'll spend lots of it on the playground."

But the closer we get to his classroom, the harder he clings, and the tighter his fists grab onto my T-shirt. His teacher spots us through the window in the door, and she drops what she's doing to peel him off me. His screams almost drown out the sound of my cell phone, starting up again.

The first flicker of worry crawls across my skin. Nobody calls twice in a row if there's not something wrong. Sam, I think, or maybe one of his parents. My heart gives a heavy thud.

Ford lurches in his teacher's arms, screaming and reaching for me, and I blow him a kiss and shut the door. Most kids calm down after a minute or two, but not Ford. He's got his daddy's stubborn streak, and his tantrums can last all day.

And through this one, my phone rings and rings.

I fumble through my bag, swiping to pick up even though I don't recognize the number. "Hello?"

"Hello, beautiful."

The air around me shimmers, growing thin and light, making me dizzy with memories of another time, another place. A sprawling terra-cotta-tiled house high on a hill. A gallery in the shadow of Sedona's red rocks. A man smiling at

me from behind an easel.

“Who’s this?” I say, even though I know exactly who it is. There’s only one man who’s ever greeted me that way.

I stumble back until my back hits a solid surface, slide down it onto the floor. On the other side of the wall, Ford wails.

“How did you get this number?” My voice sounds strange, strangled and faint.

The last time I saw him was in a courtroom, after I’d placed my hand on a Bible and told a truth that would send him away for seven years. My pulse races hard enough I wonder if I’m having a panic attack.

“I have my ways. Hey, listen, I just walked through the door of this little dive in Atlanta where they make the best *café de olla*. Like the ones we had in Tulum, remember?”

Oh, I remember. We each drank three, and then we didn’t sleep for days. Then again, that might have been the cocaine. Tyler isn’t the only person I left seven states in my rearview mirror; I buried the old me there, too.

“I’ll save us a table.”

His words, what he’s asking of me, snap me out of my stupor. Atlanta is more than a hundred miles away, a two-and-a-half-hour drive at this time of day. There’s no way I’d make it back in time for carpool.

I shake my head. “No, Tyler. *No*. I—I can’t just leave. I...”

“You, what, have a family now? A husband?” Tyler laughs, but the sound is harsh, mean. When he speaks again, he’s no longer smiling. “Does he know about us?”

I don’t answer. I can’t. Dread, like warm bile, bubbles up my throat.

Sam knows about my difficult past. He knows there are some things I won’t talk about, some subjects we skirt around like an invisible grenade. What he doesn’t know is that one of those subjects is Tyler, or that his hand painted the piece above our living room sofa, a three-by-four-foot watercolor of me. One I rolled up and stashed in an air vent until after the trial, like contraband.

“Check your texts, Mia. I’ll see you in a couple hours.”

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I push through the door of the east Atlanta coffeehouse, a bright space with exposed brick walls hung with colorful folk paintings, in a neighborhood on

the grungy side of transition. I do a quick scan—hipsters tapping away on laptops, a cluster of overly chatty women in workout gear, a tattooed and pierced barista, but no Tyler. My heart kicks, but it doesn't settle.

The last time I saw him, in handcuffs and flanked by two armed guards, I could barely breathe around the guilt. I'd spent most of the trial staring at the floor, the table, my hands because I didn't dare look at him. But the one time I did, after the verdict came down on the wrong side of guilty and the guards were dragging him out of the courtroom, he didn't look angry at all. He looked like he always did, confident and unruffled, and when his gaze caught mine, he winked. Right before the metal door clanged shut on him for seven long years, Tyler *winked*. I've spent the past seven years wondering what he meant by it.

I order a decaf latte at the counter and carry it to a table by the window, my gaze roaming the sidewalk outside, my head filled with memories of Tyler.

Tyler and I met when we were still teenagers, though neither of us felt all that young at the time. The foster system will do that to a kid, age them in ways their undeveloped brains can't wrap around until much later, but the point is, we'd both had the worst life could throw us and came out the other side, broken but still breathing. He walked into the diner where I was busing tables, and the whole place stopped to take him in. Tanned skin, blond hair streaked with sunshine. A surfer boy from the West Coast, plopped in dusty Phoenix. I watched him across the busy space, and I couldn't look away.

"Hello, beautiful," he said—his first words to me. I was half in love with him already.

Our jobs at the diner were a tedious but necessary way to pay the rent until his paintings sold, giant canvases that took up most of our shoebox of an apartment. Between shifts at the restaurant, we hauled them back and forth to galleries in his convertible Beetle, a temperamental old thing with a cracked dash and bald tires. I was his favorite subject, his muse, his lover. When Tyler's paint stroked the lines of my body, I never felt more gorgeous.

It was his idea to open the gallery in Sedona, first to sell his work and later to sell the work of others. Somewhere along the way, he'd fallen in love with Mexican folk art, and the thrill he got from discovering new, up-and-coming artists showed in our bank account. We hung paintings of famed artists on our

walls, and we sold them for prices that once upon a time we could have lived on for a decade. Only later did I learn most of what we were selling was fake; I was wearing handcuffs at the time.

Fear and pain, shock and shame. Even now, all these years later, they feel like the same emotions in my head, all jumbled up with the taste of tears and jailhouse coffee.

I'm checking the time on my cell when I hear it, a whistle coming from the back of the store like birdsong. I look around, my gaze skirting the windows and the ceiling, but there's no bird, no indication anyone else has even noticed the sound pushing up through the music and whirring of the bean grinder. For a second, I wonder if I imagined it.

And then I hear it again. A trilling whistle, a call that demands a response. The wind catches the tune, and I stand up and follow it into a hall that runs the length of the store. At the end, a door stands open, and sunlight lights up the alleyway outside, the graffitied walls too colorful and too bright, like an overexposed photo.

I step outside and there he is. Tyler, seated on the bottom step of a rusty fire escape. His face just a bit thinner, blond hair just a bit wilder, blue eyes just a bit brighter, more open.

"Hello, gorgeous," he says and the years peel away. I'm twenty-six again, Tyler twenty-seven.

Frozen in that moment when everything changed.

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He stands, and I fight the urge to run.

"Thanks for coming," he says, almost conversationally.

I take a step back, clocking the distance between us. Six feet, maybe more. Nowhere near enough. "It's not like you gave me much choice."

"Just like you didn't give me a choice when you testified against me."

His words spark an electrical storm in my chest, one that's been brewing for seven long years. "I told the truth, remember? *You* were the guilty one, not me. I had no idea what you'd been doing behind my back. We were a team, and you screwed me just as much as you screwed all those people who bought your fake paintings."

The truth is, I've spent a good part of those years nursing my own kind of

guilt. That I should have asked how we could afford all that priceless artwork. That I should have known they were fakes. The questions have kept me awake for years, pulsing hot behind my eyelids while Sam snored beside me. I never asked, I didn't know, and my guilt almost destroyed me.

But unlike me, Tyler doesn't seem the least bit worked up. He leans against the alley wall and shrugs. "I'm not going to lie to you, Mia. I was all kinds of pissed for the first year, maybe two. Okay, fine—five. But even when I was at my angriest, when I wished you were there so I could wring your neck, I never hated you. Not even a little bit." He says it quietly, purposefully, like he'd been practicing the words in his head for days.

"Well, I hated you," I say, which makes him laugh. My lie is that transparent. "I hated you for putting me in that position. Where I had to choose."

Tyler or freedom. That was the choice given to me. I was barely twenty-six, my whole life ahead of me. In the end, I chose freedom.

"You did what you had to do. I get it. I would have done the same." He smiles, and it's the saddest thing I've ever seen.

"Why are you being so nice to me?"

He shrugs. "If nothing else, seven years in a six-by-eight-foot cell gives you perspective."

I don't know what to say to that, don't know what to do with Tyler's honesty. We've never had this moment, never officially fought it out after the police stormed the gallery, but seven years' time doesn't change anything. He still lied to me. He still broke my heart.

He pushes a hank of hair back with a hand, and that's when I see it—dark stains along the beds of his nails, a flash of color the soap missed—and my heart, that fickle bitch, leaps. "Are you painting again?"

Tyler's work should have been the pieces lining the walls in the gallery, not those artists he plucked from obscurity. We should have been bringing in five figures for *his* pieces, not theirs.

He looks down at his hands like he's noticing the paint for the first time. "I'm playing around with encaustics." He shoves his hands in his pockets.

This is the dangerous part, me and Tyler out here all alone in a deserted alleyway, talking about his art. It doesn't matter that I'm married and pregnant

with another man's child, or that I live miles from here and he's fresh from prison. I want to see those encaustics in the same way I want to breathe.

He moves closer, and this time I don't step back. Images flash in my head: Tyler's smile across the crowded restaurant. The first time his lips met mine. Me naked on our ratty couch, one arm thrown above my head. Him, tossing the brush over his shoulder, that look on his face as he stalked across the room. My brain slows, and the entire world contracts to the life we could have had, the children we could have made, if only he hadn't ruined it.

"Mia?"

"Yes," I whisper, my skin tingling. If he kisses me now, God help me, I don't know if I'll have the strength to stop him.

"I want it back," he says, and the world comes crashing back. The hum of tires on asphalt, of people talking in the café, a salamander skittering up the painted alleyway wall. I search Tyler's face, study the lines fanning out from the corners of his narrowed eyes, trying to decide if he's saying what I think he is.

"The painting," he says. "I want it back."

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"What did you just say?"

I know what he said. I heard every word. Tyler wants the painting back, the one he gave me, the only thing I have left of him and me. I plant a palm in his chest and shove. "I...I can't believe you're even asking me that."

"Come on, Mia. Stop making this so difficult. That's my signature on the bottom."

"You gave it to me! You told me to keep it safe! And maybe you don't know what I had to do to keep it from my attorney and yours, but I committed perjury for that thing."

"I told you to take it, yes, but I didn't mean for you to *keep* it, keep it. I just wanted you to hold on to it until I could come back." He spreads his arms and winks, a spitting image of the last time I saw him, minus the armed guards. "I'm back."

"Too bad. I'm not giving it to you."

It's not only for sentimental reasons that I'm pushing back. There are too many lies swirling around the piece already—I *barely remember the artist, some*

*guy who paid me twenty bucks. I can't read the signature. Taylor Something.* If the painting were to suddenly disappear, how would I explain the empty spot on the wall?

“You never answered me before. Does your husband know about us? Does he know the woman he married?”

I don't answer. How many times did I try to tell Sam the truth? A million, at least. But we fell in love so fast, our relationship going from zero to Mach in a matter of days. Every time I tried, the words piled up on my tongue until suddenly, I was in too deep, and telling him became impossible.

It's true that I've kept Sam in the dark about that part of my past, but he knows other, more important things. That I love him. That I will never leave. I think these things, and yet the doubts still niggle.

“So...what, your silence for the painting? Is that why you brought me all the way here?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Seems like a fair trade.”

“If I give it to you, how do I know you'll leave me alone?”

“I guess you'll just have to trust me.”

And this is when I know giving Tyler the painting will not be the end. I don't trust him to leave me alone, not even a little bit. Tyler will be back. Tomorrow or next month or ten years from now, but he'll be back. I'll never be free.

“Is this some sick kind of revenge? Because this isn't just my life you're messing with. This is Sam's, too. My children's.”

Another shrug. “Not my fault your marriage is as fake as those Frida Kahlos we used to pass off as—”

“You. *You* used to pass them off as authentic, not me. *I* didn't know.”

“*Stop fucking around and give me back the painting!*” His shout is so sudden, so fierce that the silence that follows rings in my ears.

My skin prickles with understanding. The wink was a message. A sign I didn't understand until now. This isn't just any painting.

“You painted over something, didn't you? What is it—a Picasso? A Van Gogh?”

“A Kahlo. A real one this time.” Tyler grins. “Do you understand now?”

Oh, I understand, all right. Just like all those years ago, this isn't about me

and him. This is about money.

My phone rings, Sam's ringtone buzzing in my bag, and I realize I'm exhausted. From keeping secrets, from telling lies, even if most of them were by omission. I dig out my cell, stare at my husband's smiling face on the screen.

All these years I've justified my silence with a need to move on, to shed my past and leave it behind like old skin, but really I was afraid of what Sam would think. Would he love me less if he knew the truth? Maybe. Probably. When I walked into his restaurant looking for a job, I was still carrying so much anger at Tyler for his lies, and then I turned around and did the same to Sam. I would hate me, too.

Tell him now or tell him later. Now that Tyler is out, now that he's found me, there's no other option.

I steady my breath, and despite the inner voices screaming at me to push him to voice mail, I tap Accept. "Hi," I say, my gaze never leaving Tyler's.

"Okay, so I just had a brilliant idea. Why don't we get my parents to watch the kids this weekend so you and I can drive down to the coast, just you, me, and your skimpiest bikini. Baby number three calls for a celebration, but without babies number one and two interrupting us every few seconds. What do you think?"

"I love you," I say without thinking, and I mean every word. Right now, standing in this alleyway with a man he doesn't know exists, it's the one thing, the *only* thing that matters.

"I love you, too, babe. You know that."

"No, Sam. I mean I really, truly love you. No matter what anybody tells you about me, no matter what happens next, I need you to remember that I love you more than anything."

"What happens next... Mia, what's going on? You're scaring me."

I nod because I'm scaring me, too.

I hand Tyler the phone.

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The drive home takes a hundred years. I spend all of it trying to ignore Tyler's smug expression in my rearview mirror and thinking about Sam. Tyler told him everything, and I mean everything. About the forgeries, the trial, the

way I held on to a canvas even though it was evidence. About how that made me a criminal, too.

Sam had already hung up by the time Tyler handed me back the phone, and he doesn't pick up any of the million times I try to call. I tell myself it's because he's too busy—finding someone to take over the kitchen, racing across town to school, fetching the kids snacks, and getting Hartley started on her homework—and not because he's not speaking to me.

At sometime past four, I pull into the driveway. Tyler slows to a stop at the curb.

“Nice place,” he says across the hood, and I try to see the house the way Tyler sees it, so much less grand than the one we shared. The siding that could use a fresh coat of paint, or the cracks in the concrete walkway that have sprouted with weeds. But all I see are memories—the bench where Sam and I told Hartley she was going to be a big sister, the gardenia bush Ford drove his tricycle into, the bald spot on the hill from last weekend's session with the slip-and-slide.

The front door opens, and Sam steps out, Hartley and Ford right behind him. “Mommyyyy,” they shout, racing into the yard like they do for Sam when he gets home from work. I scoop up Ford, inhale his milk-and-peanut-butter scent, smile at Hartley tumbling in cartwheels across the yard. Sam may not want me after today, but this man, these kids are my home, and I'll spend the rest of my life trying.

“Mommy, who's that man?” Hartley says about Tyler, marching across the yard. “Why does he want your picture?”

I don't answer, and neither does Sam. Neither does Tyler, for that matter. He takes the painting from Sam's hands, carries it back to his car, and settles it gingerly on the back seat. How much will he get for it—five million? Ten? As I watch Tyler drop behind the wheel and pull away with a cheeky wave, I hope it was all worth it.

As soon as he's gone, I turn back to the house. To my husband, silent and unsmiling, standing in the open doorway like a linebacker. Blocking the way. Will this still be my home after today? I have no idea. Sam's face gives nothing away.

“Sam, I'm so sorry. I—”

He stops me with a palm. “Hang on, we don’t have much time. The police will be here any minute, and we need to get our stories straight.”

And that’s when I hear it, sirens wailing in the distance. An upbringing with an attorney father means Sam lives in a world that’s black and white, good and bad. The Masterson moral compass does not falter. When Tyler told him about the stolen millions hanging on our living room wall, Sam called the police. Of *course* he did.

“But they’ll arrest me, too,” I say, hugging Ford close to my body. “I hid the painting from the police. I shouldn’t have had it.”

“Not if you surrender the stolen Kahlo to the police, instead of handing it over to a known criminal.”

“What are you talking about? You *did* hand it over. You just gave the Kahlo to Tyler. I saw you do it.”

“You didn’t really think I’d give that asshole the Kahlo, do you?” Sam flashes me a smile—a fairly cocky one. “I switched it out for a copy two days ago.”

I shake my head. “You...switched...it out? What? I don’t... You *knew*?”

“Not until a few weeks ago, when two agents showed up at the restaurant. They thought Tyler might contact you when he got out, and they weren’t sure they could trust you. They suspected him of having the Kahlo, but they didn’t know where he stashed it. I helped them put two and two together.”

I can’t even think about what this means right now. Sam has known for weeks, and he didn’t let on. “So these agents...they had a copy made?”

Sam nods. “It wasn’t exact, but it was close enough. You really didn’t notice?”

No. I really didn’t. And neither did Tyler, apparently. Either the copy was really that good, or he was too blinded by the idea of a Kahlo underneath all that paint. Either way, he will have figured it out by now. The sirens are louder, spinning in urgent circles around the neighborhood.

“This deal was Dad’s idea,” Sam says, coming down the walkway. “He was the one who sold the plan to the FBI. Switching out the paintings. The Kahlo for a promise not to prosecute. It wasn’t easy. They didn’t know whose side you’d be on.”

The enormity of Sam’s message hits me. Sam’s father, the hotshot criminal attorney, has struck a deal on my behalf. Relief loosens some of the muscles in

my neck and shoulders, but it's not enough. I still don't know the most important thing.

"And you?" I say. "What do *you* think?"

Because this is the only thing that matters at this point. Sam knew, and he didn't say anything. A lie for a lie. Was it revenge? Some kind of test? I hold my breath and wait for his answer.

Sam looks at Hartley, frozen in the middle of the grass, watching us. She's too young to understand any of this, but she's wise enough to know something is up. That she's witnessing a significant moment. He smiles at her, then turns back to me.

"At first I didn't know what to think. I thought maybe you were in on it, too. I hoped you weren't, of course, but I didn't know for sure. Not until you handed Tyler your phone."

I hear the pain in Sam's voice, but I also see the way his expression softens at the end. *I love you*, I'd just told him. *No matter what happens next...remember that*. He was listening. We have so much more to say to each other, but at least I know he heard.

Three police cars screech to a stop on the road, and Hartley springs into motion. She scrambles across the grass, her mouth wide with fear, and attaches herself to my leg. Ford buries his face in my shoulder.

"Don't say a word," Sam says, shooting a meaningful look to the men at the road, a combination of local police and FBI. "I'll give them the painting, then hopefully that'll be the end."

No. Not the end. Not yet. There's still something I have to do.

He's almost at the door when I stop him. "Sam, wait!" He turns, and I take a deep breath. "I was seventeen, busing tables in Phoenix, when I met a boy. His name was Tyler, and he was an artist."

"Really?" Sam glances at the police and FBI agents waiting up at the road, and he laughs. "You want to do this now? Really?"

I nod. The worst possible time, but also the best because it's something I should have done ages ago. These words have been held back for far too long.

Sam holds out a hand—for Hartley and Ford, for me. "Everybody inside. Mommy's going to tell us a story."

# THE AUTHOR

KAIRA ROUDA

## **Mia**

My reflection in the jewel-like vanity mirror is deceiving. I appear serene, sophisticated, as if I'm ready for the big awards ceremony tonight. Outside the floor-to-ceiling window behind me, the sky is a brilliant pink with the setting sun. Inside, I've dimmed the lights in the room so that my imperfections are softened. The lines around my lips and the creases around my eyes have disappeared. I touch the white marble counter, an exquisite choice for our remodeled historic apartment on the Upper East Side. Everything about our apartment and our building is white-glove luxury. Only the best for me these days, as I tell my mother when she calls. The thought of my mother visiting me, with her country accent and faint ashtray smell, makes my heart miss a beat. I would never allow it. My dear mother calls me a gold digger. If that's true, I dug well.

I turn my focus back to myself. At thirty-six years old I know it's just a matter of time before this face needs some nips and tucks; at the very least, more Botox. My dark blond hair, my best feature, hangs in waves below my shoulders. I touch my chest, comforted by the string of good-luck pearls Tom

purchased for me when we were dating. They've been my touchstone ever since, a reminder that dreams do come true, but only if you're actively involved in creating those dreams. I glance admiringly at my little treasures stacked within reach on my vanity and smile. The black notebook and a stack of letters held together with a red ribbon, my addition.

I hear footsteps coming down the hall, and my heart thumps as I shove my little treasures away in the bottom drawer where I keep them hidden. He'd recognize all of it, of course. I'm just standing back up when Tom walks into the changing room. I still cannot believe he is mine. The fact that it took me so long to find true love is both disappointing and unchangeable. What do you do? Accept what life has handed you. Or not. I must admit, I sort of stalked Tom. Not in a creepy way, not at all. Just in the way you do when you see your dream and go for it before it slips away.

"There you are, darling." Tom's hand is on my shoulder, sending warmth through my body. He's been in the kitchen, I know, eating a snack to fill him up since he abhors hotel-event food. "You look gorgeous."

"Thank you, honey." I feel myself blushing as if we just met, and I wrap my arms around him. I came so close to losing this man. He had a serious girlfriend when we met and, fortunately, decided to end things with her. I won.

I believe she's out of his mind, and his thoughts, even if she still haunts mine. I smile into the mirror and push thoughts of Beth away.

Tonight is my night. Our night.

"Are you ready?" Tom kisses my cheek, and we lock eyes in the mirror. He is beyond handsome in his black tux, crisp white shirt. His thick brown hair is perfectly combed. He is two years younger than me, something he enjoys noting when I'm in a confident mood. "You *are* ready. You look amazing. You're going to win tonight, I know it."

"Thank you, but don't get your hopes up," I say, even though Tom would love to add *My wife is an award-winning novelist* to his résumé. I swallow and glance in the mirror one last time. My cap-sleeve, floor-length black designer gown has an elegant sheen, the look of, I hope, a winner in life, but of course, not at the awards. I don't deserve a literary recognition. *Us* is my first novel. When I found out my novel was a finalist in the prestigious Star Literary

Awards I almost fainted, for several reasons. I was born to be a writer. It comes naturally. But this broad recognition isn't something I sought. Quite the opposite.

I force a smile and follow Tom out of the bedroom, slipping my hand into his. Is he right? Could my book win? *Us* is a fun love story, no doubt. It's personal in a way that fiction always is, but disguised. I just hope it's disguised enough. It's been out four months, and so far, the reception has been beyond my biggest dreams.

Still, I keep expecting an email from her, or a nasty review with a barely disguised pseudonym to appear on Amazon. The silence has been surprising. Perhaps she has moved on and forgotten about all of this. I hope so.

"This thing better not last too long," Tom says as we walk into our luxurious living room. The hardwood floors gleam with the soft pink light coming through the six-foot-tall French casement windows overlooking Central Park.

"Thank you for coming with me. I know you had to rearrange your calendar." It's not easy for Tom to carve time out of his busy Wall Street schedule for me, or for anything. I understand why he hasn't even had a minute to read my novel, and I don't bother him about that. In fact, I was counting on it.

I make it a point to be everything he wants me to be. I sparkle when I need to help him entertain clients. I dazzle with stories and sophisticated banter. I never demand to be included in his plans. I simply let him know I'm here when he needs me. I don't ever want him to become disillusioned. He sees only the Mia I want him to see: sophisticated city girl with the world at her feet. He's never asked about my childhood, and I've never told him. He thinks my parents are deceased. *Little white lies make for better lives*, Mom always told me.

We stand side by side in our perfect state-of-the-art kitchen with its gray oak cabinetry, Carrara marble countertops, and mosaic backsplash of soft gray and white. Everything in our home is gray and white, the designer's favorite color scheme. I run my finger along the smooth, cool countertop. Truth be told, Beth created this place because she thought she was marrying Tom, and this would be their apartment. She almost closed the deal, that's for sure. I've done a good job of erasing her. But because Beth is, or was, a celebrated New York

City interior decorator, I've left the design as is. I only changed the accessories. Beth loved white orchids. She placed them everywhere in the apartment. It was her signature, a floral marker of her design jobs throughout the city, including our apartment. Fame is fleeting, though. Her fifteen minutes are up, over. Gone. Just like the white orchids in our apartment.

Tom takes another bite of his pre-award-ceremony meal, and I watch him with a smile. He waves a fork full of food in my direction. "Want a bite? It's Cook's signature frittata. Divine."

"Too nervous to eat." That's true. I lean against the counter and admire my life.

"Shall we?" Tom glances at his watch, an expensive piece of jewelry that fits him and his successful investment banker image. He's the full package, my husband. His platinum wedding band shines on his left ring finger. I'm glad to see it. He has a habit of forgetting to wear it. A habit I'm working hard to break. Tonight, at least, every woman who meets my handsome husband will know he's taken.

I take a deep breath. "I'm ready." *As ready as I'll ever be*, I think.

We step into the elevator and descend to the lobby in our building's ornate elevator. As the elevator doors open, Phil, Tom's driver, jumps from his seat in the lobby and bows deeply.

"Ma'am, you look spectacular."

I smile and wonder if Phil said the exact same thing to Beth, the *almost* Mrs. Anderson. Tom and I settle into the back seat of the sleek black Mercedes for the short drive to the Midtown hotel where the event is held, and another pulse of anxiety rushes through me. I take a deep breath. I hope I'm not overdressed, but that's not all I'm worried about. Writers aren't a fancy group. Since I officially joined this illustrious profession four months ago, I've discovered we're middle-class, mid-level ourselves. No one becomes an author to make a lot of money. It's art. Our craft. That a few lucky souls do make it, well, that is the stuff keeping dreams alive. I never do anything unless it's to make money. When you start out poor, like I did, you have two choices: Accept your place or get out. Even with all of Tom's money at my disposal, I must admit, I still want more.

Tonight helps. It will solidify my position in Tom's life if I become a literary

star. That's why I entered the awards competition, against my own judgment. Just to enter, I thought, that would impress Tom and that's enough. My editor, Peggy, told me not to get my hopes up for a win, that to simply be a finalist was an honor. And that's all I hoped for. But here we are, holding hands in the back seat, with Tom's eyes glistening because I've crossed the first hurdle.

Phil stops the car in front of the hotel and hurries to open the door for me before the hotel's doorman can. I guess it's part of the show. Our show. The Andersons have arrived.

As I step onto the sidewalk, I jump. I think I see Beth dashing through the revolving doors of the hotel. I imagine her eyes met mine for a moment before she hurried inside. But that's impossible. I have an overactive imagination. That's why I'm such a successful author.

"Are you cold?" Tom wraps his arm around my shoulder.

"No, it's nice tonight."

"But you just shivered."

I'm surprised he noticed. "Nerves, I suppose. But thanks for the hug." I wink at him, and he squeezes my shoulder again.

I need to get a grip on myself. Everything will be fine. It's just one night.

## **Beth**

That was close, too close.

I hurry through the hotel lobby and into the open elevator, frantically pushing the button for the twentieth floor. The doors close as I lean against the wall with a sigh. *Stupid*. I kick the elevator door in frustration.

I have to believe I turned my head just in time.

It wasn't my fault she almost spotted me. I couldn't turn away from the sight of their arrival: Mia stepping out of the Mercedes, Tom holding her hand. It was like watching myself a few years ago. But that place by his side, my place, has been taken. I smooth my hair, forgetting for a moment that I have a short bob instead of the long flowing blond locks he loved. It's part of my attempt to change my life, to start over.

It's not really working.

I still cry every day. And then, I'll lose it. Throw a dish. Or yell at a

subcontractor. My last European client just replaced me with another designer, even though I begged for another chance. That was a sign. I stormed out of the project, grabbed the few things I cared about from my apartment, and flew back to the States. My life is unraveling, thanks to the Andersons.

But they won't win. She won't win. She has gone too far.

When the doors slide open, I hurry off the elevator and down the hall to my room. Once inside, I slip the chain on the door. My dress is laid out on the bed where I left it, a gorgeous green silk that matches my eyes. Next to my dress is the square, shimmering evening bag, large enough to hold everything I need. I open the bag and peer at the contents. Satisfied, I put the purse back on the bed. I've already done my makeup. There's nothing left to do but slip on my dress. Tonight, I must make myself blend in. I must look like one of the festive guests of the stupid awards ceremony. And I will.

But first, my heart needs to settle down. I drop into the desk chair and take a deep breath. That was the first time I've seen Tom since the breakup. He still looks like the man I fell in love with, the man I had planned to marry. But looks can be deceiving. And in his case, they are. If he actually were the man I thought he was, a man who loved me and wanted to spend the rest of his life with me, he wouldn't be with her.

I can't stop the memory of that awful day from rushing into my mind. I feel my heart pounding now just as it did then. I was surprised when Tom walked into the under-construction villa, like a mirage on a cold Lake Como winter morning. I shook off the shock and, with a grin on my face, excitedly told the construction crew in passable Italian I would be leaving for the day.

"See, he's real. My lover is here!" I bragged to the workers who had teased me about my lack of a boyfriend since the job started. But the look on Tom's face worried me. Something was wrong.

"Beth, please, we need to talk." We hadn't seen each other for six months, yet he didn't rush to my side to kiss me. We hadn't touched.

"What has happened?" I took a step toward Tom as the workers cleared out of the room.

"Let's talk out there, on the veranda."

I followed Tom, not understanding. Not believing. I would be home in three weeks, so why was he here? My stunned brain allowed a friend's

warning in: *Don't leave your fiancé for six months for work. Are you crazy? I'd dismissed her concerns with murmurs of Tom loves me, and I'll never have a project this important, this special again.* And I was right, about the project. My clients were European royalty. The budget was unlimited.

I stepped out onto the veranda, my mind swirling. I touched the ancient wall.

"I don't understand. Why are you here?" I finally managed to form words, a sentence.

"I know this is a shock. It is to me, too. I didn't mean for this to happen." Tom's voice was strained, unnatural. "I was going to wait until you came home, but I need to tell you now. That's why I flew here. I want to be as transparent as possible."

*Transparent?*

"I'm in love with someone else."

I collapsed against the wall. This couldn't be happening, and yet I knew it was. A sob broke through the silence between us. I shook all over, my tears blinded me.

"Breathe," Tom said. "Calm down."

"Calm down? You cheat on your fiancée while she's away for work, and you tell me to calm down? You're a liar. You wrote me love letters. You said you loved me. Us." Tears streamed down my cheeks.

Tom and I wrote letters to each other, every week since I'd been gone, those beautiful words filled with promises. All of them meant nothing to him. I wiped my eyes with my sweater. I stared down into the cold, deep-blue lake and wondered if I should jump.

"Look, Beth, I just can't explain it any better. We are over. I'm sorry." Tom was impatient, as if the truth bored him, the facts not worth his time. He didn't try to comfort me. Just the opposite. He looked as if he had a train to catch. Most likely he did, to hurry back to New York, to his sleek office, with the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Hudson River.

I wrapped my arms around myself. Took a deep breath.

"Now I know why you haven't answered my last letter." A chill rolled down my spine. Where would I live? I had just moved in with Tom, combining our possessions. I made it *our* apartment.

“Yes, sorry. I meant to write. Thank you for sharing your feelings, I just, you know, couldn’t find the time. Look, Beth, this is awkward for me, too. Where should I send your things? Would your staging warehouse be a good place?”

I found out later *she’d* already moved into our apartment, but at the time I had no idea why he was in a rush to get rid of my stuff. My staging warehouse is where I keep clients’ furnishings until the project’s install date, where items wait before heading to a new home. Now my possessions will be trapped, wrapped in plastic, waiting for me to begin again.

“Oh, that’s a perfect ending, Tom. How thoughtful of you. I’ll email Jack at the warehouse, tell him to be on the lookout for my life.” A gust of wind sent my blond hair swirling around my face, and I grabbed it with my left hand. There was a damp chill in the air, and I shivered as I sat on the cold stone wall and watched him walk away.

That was three years ago. A lot has changed since then. Mostly inside of me. I’m off-kilter and have been since that day. I was once confident, a sought-after young decorating star. Now, tonight, I’m almost broke, standing in my hotel room, telling myself to hurry up and get changed into my rental gown. I see my fingernails bitten to the quick, and wish I had the money for a manicure. But it doesn’t matter. I tried, for a while, to get better. My last friend pushed me into counseling, and it worked.

Until I read *Us*. I can’t go on pretending things are “fine.” Not after what Mia has done.

My mind flashes to the car arriving at the hotel, the chauffeur pulling the door open and reaching for Mia’s hand, Mia’s smiling face, her impossibly long legs, her bright blue eyes, blond hair framing her heart-shaped face. Tom, in his tux, joins her on the sidewalk. We’re almost the same height, she and I. I, too, have dishwater-blond hair. I turn to the mirror in my hotel room, and before I pull off my T-shirt I assess my own looks. Sure, I’m thin, maybe too thin, and I have dark circles under my green eyes. I touch my hair, remembering how the stylist begged me not to cut it.

I’d locked eyes with her in the mirror as she stood behind me. “I want it off. All of it. If you won’t, I’ll go somewhere else.”

As she cut, I read the newspaper article announcing this year’s Literary Star

finalists, including debut author and trophy wife Mia Anderson. My wet hair dropped like bricks on the thin newspaper, ruining the page. But that didn't matter. By then I knew all the information by heart.

I pull off my T-shirt and my jeans. When I slide the cool emerald silk over my head and smooth it down my body, I can't help but smile. I look good. I do. I look like the woman Tom fell in love with years ago. I am much better for him than the imposter clinging onto his arm, his fortune. He doesn't believe me about that.

I tried to warn him. I called his office when I read the engagement announcement in the *Times*. He took the call. I begged him to reconsider, told him Mia was just after his money. He wished me well and hung up.

I didn't even have a chance to ask about my black notebook, filled with two years of doodles and dreams. It had been in my bedside table, along with all of the other treasures that found their way into those drawers. It was the only thing missing when I finally retrieved my belongings from the staging warehouse. I'd started a new diary in Italy, but without my book, I was missing two years of my life.

I tried to forget Tom, forget our almost-life together. I moved on, stayed in Europe, had a few successful projects. But I was coming unraveled, slowly, surely, each year. And then, four months ago, *her* book was published.

I stare at my reflection, my right eye twitches, a pulsing sound fills my ears.

I'll never recover from all of this.

## **Mia**

It's a who's who of the literary world of New York, and I'm here. Of course I belong, but the anxiety I felt before we arrived has compounded into what can only be a full-blown panic attack. It's hard to catch my breath, my palms are sweating, but I can't let Tom notice.

I smile at him as we finish checking in. The woman behind the table is dressed in a low-plunging gold dress. Her cheeks flush, and it's obvious she doesn't notice my distress, only Tom's broad smile. Happens all the time, and I deal with these women.

"Ah, there we are." Tom points to our name tags on the table. "Mia Anderson and Tom Anderson." My name tag has a gold star on it. A pang of

guilt punctures my stomach. *I shouldn't be here. I need to get out of here. This is a mistake.*

She extends her hand. "Perfect. Here you are. And the gold star means you're a finalist. Congratulations. Which category?"

"Debut novel." I'm going to be sick. "Come on, Tom, we need to get to the table." I slip my arm through his. We make a few steps down the red-carpeted hallway toward the main ballroom when I spot the ladies' restroom.

"I think I'll just pop in there, freshen up."

Tom stares at me. "Your face is completely white."

"Nerves getting the best of me." I take a breath and remind myself I won't win. I can't win. Tom won't be paying attention either way. He'll check his phone, multitask. I know he has at least read the synopsis of *Us*, because he knows enough to banter about the book at dinner parties. If he'd read the novel, he'd know, wouldn't he?

Only the winning novels are read aloud, and then only a few pages. Everything will be fine. She is not here, of course. No one will know the truth.

"Yes, I'll go in and put a little powder on. Meet you at the table."

Tom smiles at my command. "Don't be long. Who knows who they've seated us with?" He kisses my forehead and walks into the crowd as I hustle into the ladies' room. The line is fifteen women deep, but I only need a mirror. As I excuse myself and push into the room, my phone rings in my purse. Everyone stares. My face flushes as I pull open my sparkly cocktail bag and grab my phone. Even though the number is "unknown," I answer to stop the ringing.

"Mia Anderson speaking."

"You'll be revealed tonight for who you really are," a raspy voice says. I can't tell whether it's a man or a woman. "Enjoy these last moments before the charade is over. Your life will be over."

"Who is this?" I demand, but the line is dead. I feel women staring at me, so I turn to the mirror and rummage in my purse for my blush and lipstick. I add some color to my face. I have no idea who called me, or what they want. It had to be a prank, kids having fun on a Friday night. I stare at my reflection and decide to believe my own story.

I make my way out to the hall and run into my editor. Peggy wears huge black-rimmed glasses, and I wonder if she needs them or if they are for effect. She's forty years old, a workaholic, and helped me shape *Us* into the best work of fiction it could be. I hug Peggy as she murmurs how beautiful I look. Peggy herself never dresses for these things, saying, "It brings me luck if I blend in. You're the star anyway."

"Hardly." I slip my arm through hers, and we float down the hall with the sea of people. Peggy's confidence seeps into me. She believes in me, in *Us*, and because of that, we're here tonight. She plucked my manuscript from the slush pile the first week I submitted it and called, crying, after reading the final love letter. I realize for most writers this never happens. But I'm lucky, and talented. I am. She rushed it to publication, only eight months between acquisition and pub date. Peggy was convinced our country was in need of a pure American love story. I guess, since we're here tonight, she was right.

"You have to do a reading when you win. Have you picked a passage?" Peggy asks, sending my heart hopping.

"Oh, they wouldn't do that, would they?" I won't win. *Please, God, don't let me win.*

"It's tradition, so yes, they will. I tell my authors to start from the beginning." Peggy stops at the grand entrance to the glittering, candlelit ballroom. "What's your table number?"

"Eight. Yours?" I manage to say, although I'm panicking about the reading. I've only read aloud from *Us* once, and that was at the launch party at the small local bookstore in my hometown. My mom's friends came. That was enough of a crowd. There are hundreds of people in this ballroom.

Peggy laughs. "I'm at forty-eight. Near the back, but I'll be the one clapping the loudest. Where's that gorgeous husband of yours?"

"Waiting for me at the table. Better go."

"Good luck, Mia. I'm very proud of you." She waves and disappears into the crowd.

I spot Tom up front, close to the stage. He sees me, nods his head. He needs me. The ballroom is crowded and noisy with guests networking, waving to friends. I don't know anyone but plunge into the crowd, keeping my head down, avoiding eye contact. I hear a loud crash, a tray of glasses dropped in

the kitchen, perhaps, but I keep moving. The center aisle is crowded with people, so I move farther to the right and notice an exit. I could leave now, duck out the door, and text for Tom to join me. We could be back home in twenty minutes, avoiding all of this. I touch the door and freeze, hearing a strange, low buzzing noise, and notice the warning: *Fire Exit. Alarm will sound if door is opened.*

“Don’t you dare!” Tom stands in front of me, hands on his hips.

I smile, but he doesn’t. I pull my hand from the emergency exit. “Okay, for you, I won’t cause an evacuation of the awards ceremony. How’s our table?”

“Horrible. I’m beyond bored. Where have you been? I need you and your sparkling wit to help carry the conversation, especially since this is your gig.” Tom grabs my hand and pulls me through the crowd, like an icebreaking ship on a frozen lake. I still want to find an exit. But I’ve run out of time.

“Meet my lovely wife, Mia, author of *Us*, and a fellow finalist.” The men at the table struggle to their feet by way of welcoming me as their wives toss half smiles. Tom pulls out my chair, and I slide into my seat. While we exchange pleasantries and congratulations, a server fills my wineglass and I check my reflection in the glass. My makeup seems perfect. The lights dim and the ceremony begins.

Tom leans over and squeezes my hand, whispering, “Win or lose, it’s still a great thing for your résumé, and mine. I’m watching the game on my phone. Nudge me if anything happens.”

I force a smile and hope tonight is as uneventful as the game he’s watching. I also realize if he knew the truth about everything, he would have pushed me through the exit door himself.

## **Beth**

I’m standing backstage, drinking a glass of Merlot, trying to keep the tears in my eyes from spilling out and ruining my makeup. *Not tonight*, I tell myself. I can see the crowd, but they can’t see me. A glittering New York gathering, something I was used to before my life was stolen from me. By her. I bite my lip hard, drawing blood, enjoying the taste. I feel the weight of my purse on my shoulder, and I smile at my plans.

Onstage, tonight’s emcee, my college friend Mike, begins to read the

synopsis of Mia's book. It's a paragraph I'm familiar with, since I have seen it for months online.

I close my eyes. I'm where I'm meant to be.

Mike continues, "A young couple's love is tested when the woman is pulled away on a dream project in Italy while her boyfriend stays behind to build his career in a competitive finance field. Committed to each other and dreading the separation, they agree to a love experiment. They will write love letters to each other. No texts. Limited phone calls. *Us* is the charming tale about taking your time and sharing your dreams, of getting to know each other through the written word, and of revealing your heart to another person. If your relationship is in a rut, maybe you should spend some time writing your own story of *Us*."

Polite applause follows. I open my eyes and focus on Tom sitting beside *her* at one of the front tables. He's looking down at his phone. Could he be that clueless? Doesn't he realize it's not Mia's story, it's ours? How can he hear that summary without a big light bulb going off? He's oblivious. Or mindless. Swept up in Mia's fake world. It's like watching someone slowly sink into a mental illness. He needs help, needs to snap out of it.

That's why I'm here. I'm listening to what my inner voice tells me to do now, not to anyone else.

Mike nods in my direction. My cue to roll out the table with the shiny gold star awards. Mike confided in me last week, during a long dinner with many glasses of wine, so I already know the winners. I hide my purse under a chair and push the table out toward the podium, avoiding the spotlight. Mike grabs the table, and I duck again into the shadows.

"Ah, just look at these beauties. The Literary Star of the Year Awards." Mike holds an award. The audience chatters with excitement. "We'll begin with the winner of the nonfiction category."

My mind drifts. Mia should have entered *Us* in the nonfiction category, because it's true. At least most of it. Of course, she changed the ending, in real life and in the book.

There's always a chance for a sequel. But she won't be the one writing it.

I open my purse. The voice inside me, the one I can no longer control, says, "Good girl."

## Mia

The emcee, an overly dramatic man with over-the-top hand flourishes and a too-tight tux, has presented all of the awards except for the one in my category. The lonely trophy glistens onstage, mocking me.

“This is it.” Tom squeezes my hand. The game has ended. His team won, that much I know. At this moment, he’s paying attention.

“I suppose it is.” I take a drink of water. There is no possible way my book can win this thing. I mean, sure, the book struck a chord: right place, right time, love and all that. It’s very sweet, hopeful. I wish life could be that easy.

Of course, with any success, there is more to the story than meets the eye.

I hear the emcee’s voice calling my name.

I’ve won. Oh my God.

I’m going to come clean. That’s it. It’s a sign. I’ve gone too far this time, that’s why I saw Beth outside tonight. It’s why I can’t sleep.

I was going to tell her, I was. I only meant to keep her diary for a little while, and then send it to her. And the letters? Well, those belonged to Tom, didn’t they? She sent them to him.

“Mia, you need to go onstage.” Tom helps me up, walks me to the stage. My legs are rubber, my mind is a blank, and everything is happening so fast. I close my eyes, hoping this is a bad dream. I reach the center of the stage, dazzled by the light after sitting in the dark for so long.

“Congratulations, Mia Anderson. Please, honor us with a reading from your novel.”

The emcee hands me the heavy award and a copy of my book. He steps to the side and I’m alone at the podium.

I lean forward, my lips almost touch the microphone. “I really can’t accept this award.” The audience laughs at what I’ve said. They’ve heard it before. But I’m serious. This is a nightmare.

The emcee pats me on the back and smiles, whispering, “Don’t be silly. Start your reading.”

My eyes meet Tom’s. He mouths, “Read!”

My husband is embarrassed. I open my book. I begin to read with a shaking voice. “It was love at first sight. The moment we locked eyes at the coffee

shop we knew there was a connection. Could we sustain that over a six-month separation? That was the question only time could answer.”

I’m distracted by a shadow moving onstage and into the spotlight. A woman crosses in front of the emcee and stops two feet from me. I recognize her but I can’t place her. Is she another contest judge? Another author? She’s beautiful, with short blond hair and a long green dress.

She steps forward. “That question was never answered, was it, Mia?”

The audience begins to murmur as the emcee grabs the woman’s arm. “Beth, what is the meaning of this?”

“I’m here so Mia will tell you all the truth.” Beth points her finger at me. “Tell the audience whose story this is. Whose life you’ve stolen.” She turns to the crowd. “This woman is a fraud. She lured my boyfriend into a relationship while I was in Italy. She stole my life, kept my diary, and then she wrote my story. And you’re giving her an award.”

The emcee backs away, and there are only two of us in the spotlight, Beth and me.

I lean into the microphone. “She’s right. I’m sorry.”

Gasps from the crowd are followed by screams.

Beth is pointing a gun at my head.

“It’s too late for apologies. You knew what you were doing all along. You thought you could get away with it. You were wrong.”

Time is suspended. In my mind, I am backing away from her, but in reality, I’m frozen standing next to her. I stare into Beth’s eyes, but I don’t see anything but rage.

I swallow. I lift my hands in the air. I wonder if she’ll shoot me in the face, or the heart. I wonder what Tom is doing? In the audience I hear voices and chairs scraping as people run. I still cannot see anything beyond the barrel of her gun.

Beth holds the gun with both hands and the barrel moves to point at my chest. “You took my ideas, my thoughts, my most precious feelings and pretended they were yours. You printed my letters?” She shakes her head and yells, “They aren’t your words, Mia. They’re mine. This isn’t your love story at all. And now it’s over.”

I take a step back, shaking. Behind her I see a black shape, a SWAT officer in

position. A man's voice commands, "Drop the gun! Now! Hands in the air."

Someone leaps on me from behind, and we crash to the stage as I hear Beth scream.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" the man who has tackled me to the floor asks before climbing off me. He offers his hand.

I try to grab him, but my right hand hangs at an odd angle, thrumming with pain. My wrist must have broken when we both landed. It's a small price to pay. He hoists me to standing.

"Thank you for saving my life."

"No problem. Sorry about your wrist. We'll get a medic here for you. Hang tight."

I stand next to the officer and watch as Beth is handcuffed. She glares at me, her green eyes flashing. "This isn't the end."

Tom steps up beside me and wraps his arm around me. "My God, are you okay?"

Beth and I lock eyes and I realize now I saw her when we arrived. I wonder how long she's been following us, waiting for her revenge. I also wonder why I spent so much time worrying she'd write a bad review. She had other plans.

Beth is being led away by half a dozen officers, yelling behind her, "You can't steal other people's lives. I'll beat this, and then I'll come for you again."

I burrow into Tom's side, but I can't let her have the last word, can I? "Why don't you send us some letters from prison? That could make for an interesting book."

Beth tries to charge at me, a crazy animal sound coming from her mouth, but the cops drag her offstage. She's a little terrifying, actually.

"Why did you say that to her?" Tom asks. "That was cruel."

"She almost killed me." I believe that justifies a bit of snark. Tom will come around.

Before Tom can formulate a response, two paramedics appear onstage. "Are you hurt, ma'am?" one asks me as I shake my head.

"It's just my wrist." I hold it out to him. As I focus on it, a painful throbbing begins. I look away as tears fill my eyes.

"Let's tape that for you and then get you to the hospital for X-rays."

I glance at Tom. I can't tell if he is mad at me or relieved it's over.

Tom's story and mine have overlapped and blurred, intersecting with his story with Beth's, past and present. I suppose every great love starts with a great story. It's the ending that causes the uncertainty. Beth didn't imagine me coming between them, stealing her fairy-tale ending, just as I never dreamed she'd appear to ruin the best day of my life, up to now. I'm not sure whether I'll still receive the award, but I suppose if it's a criminal's word against mine, I'll probably win.

I wince when the paramedic wraps my wrist.

Tom sits down next to me and holds my other hand. "I still can't believe that happened."

"Me either."

The paramedic finishes his ministrations. "We can transport her to the hospital, or you can take her."

"I'll drive her. Thank you." Tom helps me to stand. "Oh, wait. We can't forget this."

He grabs my award from the podium, holding it proudly as he wraps his arm around me. As if nothing has happened. As if the room is filled with clapping admirers. As if I'm his literary-star wife. As if I didn't steal someone else's love story.

I tilt my head, hesitating.

"What? You won. They gave you this award, so we're taking it. Phil's out back. This way."

Tom leads us backstage and out a door I didn't know existed. Phil and Tom settle me into the luxurious back seat and close the door. As the men talk outside the car, I reach into my purse and pull out my powder compact.

Tears fill my eyes as I look at my reflection in the mirror. Tom must know Beth was telling the truth about the novel. He knows I'm a liar, a thief, a fraud. He's decided to ignore it. He will carry on, as if his wife is a literary award winner, as if this never happened. He will want me out of a cast as soon as possible, that much I also know, to erase any bad memory of this night in other people's minds. He's likely already called his PR team in to handle damage control. There won't be a bold headline on the front page of tomorrow's paper screaming, *Deranged Ex-Lover Tries to Murder Millionaire's Wife Onstage*. Instead, the story will be buried, and there will only be polite

coverage of the Literary Star Award winners.

Tom doesn't care about the truth, only appearances. I guess that means we're perfect for each other. As my wrist thumps with pain, my mom's words spring into my head: *You've made your bed, now you'll have to lie in it.*

I shake my head and chase her words away.

Phil jumps in the driver's seat as Tom opens the passenger door and slides inside next to me.

He pats my knee. "We'll head to the hospital now. Get your wrist fixed up. And then, home. Don't worry about anything. It's handled. If an embarrassment ensues, with what happened onstage tonight, I'll move to the San Francisco office. With you, of course. A fresh start for both of us. As you know, appearances are everything in this world." He touches the award on the seat between us.

And just like that we're driving to the hospital. We're creating our own unique type of love story now. As charmed as the story may be, our relationship won't win any awards.

But I'll make it work. And I'll enjoy the trappings.

# THE LAWYER

CATHERINE MCKENZIE

I'M DRIVING TO WORK WHEN I make the decision. It's funny, because it seems like a small leap given the day I'm having. The life. But premeditated murder never is a small decision, even if the steps that lead there are an accumulation of smaller things.

Maybe I should've started there: I'm going to kill my husband.

Lots of women think this, I'm sure. I have too, once or twice. But I mean it this time. I'm determined. I haven't worked out all the details yet, but by the end of this day I will.

Here's why.

---

I'm feeling a bit emotional right now—emotional woman, of course, that explains it. As if women don't have a thousand reasons to be emotional, as if reacting to messed-up things with equanimity is some sort of virtue that only men possess. Which is total bullshit because, as a colleague once put it, men are the criminal justice system's best customers.

If men can do it—react emotionally to the screwed-up moments in life—I can, too.

Only, I need to keep my wits about me. Emotions are what cause mistakes. Emotion are what lead to getting caught.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I might meander a bit; bear with me. While plotting to kill your husband has a satisfying rightness to it, it also takes up a lot of space between the ears. As it should.

Anyway.

I asked for paint supplies for my fourteenth birthday. This wouldn't seem relevant, but trust me, it is.

I forgot that until last night when I was trying to sleep. I always have trouble sleeping the night before a big trial, and today is the biggest. A two-week trial with me in the pole position, millions on the line. It's what I've been working toward for the last ten years. If I nail it, I'll make equity partner. If I lose, cases will be shifted away from me, my hours will flag, and I'll be out in a year or two, another woman who couldn't cut it.

So there I was, not sleeping. It was coming up on midnight. My husband, Mike, was deeply asleep next to me, but my brain was whirring like the fan in an overheated laptop. I was scrolling through my newsfeed on Facebook on Mike's iPad, and there it was—one of those ads for miracle products like they show on late-night TV. Paint supplies that would somehow make me into an amazing artist. No aptitude, no lessons? No problem. Just send us \$79.99, no, wait, \$49.99 in the next ten minutes, and you'll be on your way. As I watched the ad, something was scratching around my brain like a mouse caught in the walls, and then the memory popped up. Me and my paint supplies at fourteen, which I used exactly once, then shoved in my closet, hoping my parents would forget that I'd asked for such an expensive gift that I never ended up using.

The thing is, I have no talent for painting. I don't know what made me think, then, that if I had the right supplies, that would change. It was probably my first real bout of magical thinking. That's what these advertisements are about, right? Use our product and you can change what you're no good at; lose that weight; have fantastic eyelashes; hair that curls in just the right way.

Magical thinking. If you want something enough, it will happen. And also: If you push hard enough against something, it won't.

Neither of these are true, but I can't stop wishing they were.

It's funny how things work sometimes.

If I hadn't had the trial today. If I'd been able to sleep. If I hadn't opened his iPad. If I hadn't been distracted by the ad for the stupid paint supplies, which led me down a rabbit hole of searching for videos of that trippy seventies painting guy because I thought his soothing voice would lull me into sleep...

It took all of these things, each tiny event, for me to be awake to receive a text that would change my life forever.

That would leave me wishing that magic *was* real, and that thinking was enough to change the course of my history.

That would have me plotting murder.

---

The oddest thing is that the text was from Mike. When the notification popped into my screen my first thought was: *How is Mike texting me?*

I was tired, like I said.

Then I read the text.

***I can't stop thinking about you.***

The text was not from Mike my husband, obviously, because he was asleep, and even when he was awake, he wasn't the kind of guy to write a text like that. Even in our first six months, when he was chasing me, he wasn't big on texting or sharing his emotions. See, men again. Anyway, a text from Mike even then was more likely to be something like: *Reservation at 7*. Not that he couldn't be romantic in person, but his prose was limited.

So not from my Mike. Someone was *writing to* Mike. Another Mike.

A man? Was my husband gay? Was my husband having some gay affair with a man with the same name? That seemed a bit narcissistic to me, but also, somehow, maybe forgivable, in a way, because somehow my-husband-is-actually-gay infidelity seems better than my-husband-is-just-a-selfish-lying-prick infidelity. But Mike, my Mike, the Mike I'm going to kill, isn't gay.

And the Mike who wrote the text is really Mikahla, a woman I didn't even know my Mike knew, and she's also married, but young, of course young and...

I'm getting ahead of the story. You see what I mean about my brain?

I scrolled through the possibilities quickly after reading the text, Mike, man, Mike, gay, Mike, affair, Mike, gay-affair, Mike-not-gay, Mike-must-be-a-woman, Mike-and-Mike-having-an-affair. Husband-affair.

*What?*

I said it out loud, which I only realized when the real-life Mike mumbled next to me.

I clenched my jaw. And then my fingers flew over the screen's keyboard, and this is what came out:

**What are you thinking about?**

That little bubble appeared. Mike was writing back!

***You. The way you feel inside me.***

My hand came up instinctively, holding the bile inside my mouth. I flew to the bathroom and made it to the sink on time.

I don't recommend reverse *pad thai*.

I don't recommend texting with your husband's lover, either.

But as I sat on the bathroom floor trying to find the strength to rise and clean up the leftovers of my dinner, I couldn't help myself.

I played along. I played my husband. I gathered details. I learned her name.

I got her picture.

---

She's not as pretty as me.

I think I have the right to say this. I wasn't looking my best when I first had that thought, sitting on the bathroom floor wishing I had the strength to brush my teeth, but it was still true. She had a gap between her teeth, and her face was a bit too round, and she looked, from the shot she sent me, like she could stand to lose a few pounds.

I know, okay, don't judge me. This woman is sleeping with my husband. I think I have the right to be critical of her appearance.

Besides, you'd agree with me.

Today, I look good. I've got my armor back on—a tailored suit that accentuates my height. The right makeup to frame my heart-shaped face. My dishwater-blond hair is styled back at the nape of my neck, just loose enough

to soften me and make me approachable, but still intimidating.

My court look. My battle dress. Maybe even the clothes I'm going to commit a murder in, though it wouldn't be the natural outfit. I think you'd want something with more pockets, for one thing.

But regardless, I am ready to do battle.

That's probably what cost me my nanny this morning.

In my defense, it's been a rough twenty-four hours. Big trial. No sleep. Husband cheating with woman I was sexting with last night on his behalf. You know all that. Keira doesn't. When she arrived twenty minutes late, my sons, Jake and Epping (a family name from Mike's side of the family that he *insisted* we call our second son, with a pedantic obsession that I should've seen as a sign of something), were running around the living room in one pair of pajamas. Jake was wearing the top, Epping the bottom. The clothes I'd tried to force them into were sitting in a heap on the floor, and the sounds of their yelling were echoing around the living room.

And where was Mike, you might ask?

Taking one of his patented twenty-minute morning showers. That these had survived the arrival of both of our children should've been another sign. While my hair went unwashed for days, his was always perfectly arranged. His morning workouts survived, too—thirty-minute runs on the same trajectory around our neighborhood, rain or sun or snow. Sometimes, when the kids were three and one, and the smell of their poopy diapers seem to cling to the inside of my nose, I used to wish he would die on one of those runs. Get hit by a car or have one of those widow-maker heart attacks. Then the boys got older, and my hygiene improved, and we moved on, reconnected, starting having regular sex again.

Not enough sex, I guess. That's why people have affairs, right?

I was standing in the middle of chaos thinking: *I'm prettier than her, I'm prettier than her*, and then Jake threw something and Keira walked in on her phone, not even apologizing, and I wasn't very nice about it. I may have lost my shit, in fact. I may have raised my voice and spoken through gritted teeth. And this mild girl who's worked for me for three years and has always been treated kindly (assuming she doesn't take the occasional "I hate you!" from a three-year-old personally) put her hands on her hips and threw back her head as if

she'd been planning it all along and said, "I quit."

The living room became awfully quiet. Sometimes even unruly kids know when to shut it. They turned and looked at me, waiting for my reaction.

*Am I so awful, I thought, that even my own children expect me to explode at something that's perfectly reasonable to lose it at? Is this why Mike cheated on me? Did I do this?*

I tried to count to three in my head, but I only made it to two before I turned away and yelled, "Mike!"

---

She doesn't look like me, and yet she does. Mike. Mikhaila. It's like she has my face if I'd made different choices in my life—worse choices, perhaps, though maybe not after this morning.

I hate myself for thinking about this, even for one minute.

I hate Mike. My Mike. Soon-to-be-ex-husband Mike.

And yet I needed him this morning to wrangle the children and let me escape out the door because I can't be late for court. I've never cancelled a court date, never not made it on time, and I can't start now. *You see, Your Honor, there was this text...* No. No.

Oh, Mike, why couldn't you have said no?

---

I'm not sure how I'm going to do it yet, but I am sure of one thing.

I'll get away with it. I'm not going to prison for him or for her or for anyone.

When a wife is killed, the husband is always the first suspect. But when the opposite happens? There are so many other possible explanations.

Crossed business deals and jealous lovers and... Why do police think that only men have the passion to carry through with something when their life is crossed? Why can't we have the passion for it, too? Or is this all some TV-made-up myth? The police probably suspect wives, too, especially when there's an affair involved.

I need to think like a cop.

---

Our courthouse is a dingy affair. The carpet is from the seventies, and I start

coughing and sneezing as soon as I walk in the building. It's a "sick" building—*asbestos, vermiculite?* I've blocked out the details—and a few years ago the clerks brought a class action lawsuit against the county that was settled out of court.

My cell rings right after I get out of security.

It's Mike.

"Yes?"

"What is up with you this morning, Gracie?"

I feel my face flush. Grace is my middle name; Gracie is Mike's nickname for me. Only, he hasn't called me that for months, I now realize. I should've realized. I should've known. Oh God. Fuck you, Mike. Fuck you for turning me into a scorned woman in the time it took me to drive to work.

"You were there, you saw what was going on."

"You mean the nanny?"

I close my eyes. His voice in the phone sounds echoey, a bad connection. "Yes, the nanny. And our children, and...you know I have a big trial today."

"Oh, that's right."

Now I want to throw the phone against a wall. How am I going to do this? There is no standard operating procedure for finding out your husband's cheating on you. Or maybe there is. Maybe I should pack up all his stuff and put it on the lawn and light it on fire. The blaze would feel like a victory.

Only, I won't get away with killing him if I do that, and the children will see.

The children. *Fuck.*

"You weren't listening. Again."

"You're right, I should listen more. But I'm worried about you, Gracie. I know you get stressed, but this seems like... something else."

He's fishing. Goddamn him, he's fishing. He knows me. He knows I get stressed, but not this stressed. And he's on the watch, careful, worried about being found out. The first thing he probably did this morning was check his phone, his texts... but I deleted all the conversations I had with Mike last night. I deleted the whole thread. Did he sigh in relief when he saw there was nothing? Will she reference our conversation in their next?

I can't worry about that right now.

“It’s just this case. I have to nail it.”

“You will.”

“Thanks.”

“No, G. I mean it. You are...amazing.”

I open my eyes. My co-counsel, Daniel, is standing in front of me, smiling but also looking concerned. I feel tears spring to my eyes, but I can’t release them. Daniel is a shark, and a crying female lawyer is the chum in the water he’s been waiting for.

“I’ve got to go.”

“Let me know how it goes.”

“I will.”

I end the call and slip my phone into my purse. I take a deep breath and force myself to smile at Daniel.

“Everything all right at home?” he asks.

Daniel is thirty-four, ambitious, and single. He never has to leave early to pick a kid up or go to a soccer game. He can sleep at the office if he needs to. Sometimes, I think he sleeps at the office when he doesn’t need to, just to drive that point home.

“Of course.”

“Good, but if you need...”

“I got it. Have you seen Davidson?”

“I sent him upstairs.”

“Great.”

“You ready?”

“I’m always ready.”

---

*Davidson vs. News Association* is a rare civil case that has attracted a lot of media attention. Davidson is *that* Davidson, the nightly face of the nightly news, right up until he was accused of plagiarism, his passionate weekly editorials matched up in a devastating YouTube video with famous words delivered by Cronkite. He was dismissed, but he didn’t go quietly. He was the first African-American to host a national nightly broadcast, and he’d endured years of discrimination to get there. He’d screwed up—he admitted that, but not with intention. And the company hadn’t given him a chance to redeem

himself. Others who committed similar crimes, that guy who claimed he was in a gunfight when he wasn't, that other guy who slept with every junior staffer for years—they'd all been given second chances. Yanked from the nightly news, but allowed to atone in the morning, or worse, midday, until people forgot and they could come back from hiatus.

He'd come to see me—not one of the senior partners, but me—because we had kids the same age who played in the same kindergym class on the weekends. He was an involved dad; he didn't have to be into work until late, he had the weekends off.

We'd struck up a friendship of sorts, and I'd appeared on his program a few times—a legal talking head there to discuss some case in the news. When he'd been faced with bringing a lawsuit, he'd reached out. I'd been flattered and scared, knowing my staid bosses wouldn't want to rock the boat. I'd argued to the management committee why we should take the case, and they'd agreed. They'd also made it clear that if I messed it up, that was going to be on me.

Daniel and I take the elevator to the second floor. Darnell is waiting for us outside the courtroom, in a clear standoff with the press. They advance toward me like a swarm with their microphones, and I give my patented *We're glad to finally be at this stage and look forward to righting this injustice*. I'm boring and won't be prodded, and so they leave me alone after a moment.

I lead Darnell into an interview room—smaller rooms that are there for attorneys to speak to their clients out of earshot. We sit across from one other. Darnell's wearing a well-cut dark blue suit and a red tie—a conservative uniform, a signal to the court that he's taking this very seriously and that he belongs to the institutions he hopes will protect him.

“Did you sleep?” I ask.

“Some. You?”

“Some.”

He smiles. “I had one of those dreams...an anxiety dream, I'd guess you'd call it. I'd signed up for a class I'd forgotten.”

“Ah,” I say. “That dream. I know it well.”

“It's like a kind of shared consciousness,” Daniel says. “Everyone dreaming the same thing.”

I shoot him a look. We've spoken about this. These moments before court

begins are for me to bond one last time with the client. To transfer my confidence before the ups and downs and the trial begin to take their toll. He looks away, chastened.

“So, today we pick a jury. Tomorrow, opening arguments.”

“And we want a mixed jury, right? People with open minds.”

That had been our strategy. That we would use our challenges and other techniques to weed out the closet racists and get down to a group of men and women—preferably women—who would see this case for what it was.

“I’ve had a thought about that,” I say.

“Oh?”

“I think we should take them as they come.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to use any challenges.”

Darnell frowns. He’s a meticulous and well-thought-out man, and this new plan of mine is anything but.

“I don’t follow.”

I lean forward. “I’m going to let you in on a little secret, something I’ve always suspected but pretty much know for sure now.”

“Yes?”

“Anyone who says they can tell what someone is thinking is a liar.”

“But...”

I push the thoughts of Mike and Mike from my mind. “I really think this is the way to go. We need to think outside the box here.”

Darnell leans back in his chair and strokes his chin. I can feel Daniel vibrating behind me. Whether it’s with excitement at my idea or glee at the thought that I’m screwing myself for sure, it’s hard to tell.

“Can I wait to see who the potential jurors are?”

“Sure, that seems like a fair compromise.”

He smiles. “I need to win this.”

“I know.”

We stand and leave the room. The journalists are still there, and they look at me expectantly. I shake my head and they walk away, defeated.

I know the feeling.

---

Never have you seen a group of people so desperate to get out of something than jury selection. It's pathetic, honestly, the excuses people come up with. The elderly parents who suddenly need care, the sick uncle, the work project that cannot be postponed. And yet, if they were sitting where Darnell is, they'd be desperate for people just like them to be on their jury. It was a great disappointment in my life to learn that lawyers can't sit on juries. Apparently, they fear we'd be too influential, or give different instructions on the law than the judge. But what I know we'd be—to a woman—is eager.

Of course, disappointment has a different flavor to it now.

---

As I sit and listen to the judge explain to the prospective jurors what's going to happen today, I try to convince myself that I didn't propose this new strategy to Darnell in order to give myself enough time to think of how I'm going to kill my husband.

I fear it might be, though. Because it does give me time to do just that.

But how can I do it? Despite my bluff to myself earlier, I know that if Mike dies suddenly, I will be the prime suspect. The police will investigate and they'll uncover the affair and that will be it for me. The kids will have no parents—oh God, the kids, I can't think about them, I can't—and I'll be rotting in jail for the rest of my life because of that cheating bastard.

One bad decision and my life will be over.

But I can't let him get away with it, either. He needs to be punished somehow. Because he won't be punished if I don't do anything. His guy friends will be a little uncomfortable around him for a while, and some of the women might stop talking to him, but then again, maybe not.

"Shall we begin?" the judge asks.

"Yes, Your Honor."

The first potential juror is called into the witness box. A woman in her seventies who—according to her questionnaire—was a school librarian for forty years.

I rise and walk to the witness box.

"Good morning, Mrs. Holiday."

"Good morning."

She smiles nervously. This is a normal reaction. I smile back to show her that

there's nothing to fear here, certainly not from me.

"Have you heard of the plaintiff, Darnell Davidson?"

"I've seen him on the news, if that's what you mean?"

"Sure. And have you heard or read anything about this case?"

"Hard not to."

"Do you think you've made up your mind about it?"

"No, I wouldn't say that."

"Would you call yourself a fair person?"

"I'd like to think so."

"Thank you. We have no objection to this witness."

I can feel the surprise of my opponent without looking at him. I'm known for asking a long series of questions driven by jury consultant data. I've never taken the first juror presented; I'm also known for having a superstition about that. But all my intuition and superstitions have led to nothing—no, worse. They've led to me having no clue that my husband was sexting and probably more with some other woman. That's out the window now. I'm George Costanza on *Opposite Day*. I'm ignoring my instincts for good.

My opponent—an ambitious guy at a rival law firm, named Chris Top—stands and starts to ask his questions. I half listen as Darnell shoves me a note. *Are you sure?* I nod. She's an ordinary woman—a mother of two, retired, lives in a good neighborhood. Why can't she be a good juror? If we can't convince twelve ordinary people of our arguments, maybe they're no good.

I don't say this out loud, of course. I'm addled, but not yet stupid.

The potential juror has other ideas. "I don't think I can serve, though, sir."

"Why's that, ma'am?"

"I look after my grandkids."

"What about their parents?"

"They're going through a tough time right now. My son... my son cheated on his wife and she's...well, something like that changes a person. She needs my help. Her and the kids both."

My throat constricts. Courtrooms are life. I think of my own parents, and my in-laws. Would my mother-in-law stand by me the way this woman seems to be standing by hers? Unlikely. She always had a hesitancy about me, something she held back. And Mike is just the type to turn her against me so

he has an ally.

My parents live in Florida, and they've never been close to the kids. Would I want them to raise them?

What the hell am I thinking?

And just like that I know: I can't kill Mike.

But I can make him suffer.

---

We break for coffee at 11. By that time, I've said yes to eight jurors, six of which have been nixed by my opponent. I can tell my accepting everyone is throwing him off his plan. I should've done this years ago. Who knows what the result will be with the jury, but it probably won't make any difference. We have a strong case. Darnell's a good witness—he knows how to charm people. And, despite everything, I still believe in the innate goodness of most people.

Everyone but Mike, that is. And the other Mike.

I take my phone with me into the bathroom and lock myself in a stall. Something about it reminds me of last night when I was sitting on the bathroom floor. What led me to write her back? Why did I slow down and watch that accident, exacerbate it even? And what can I do about it now?

Life is full of turning points.

Sometimes, they're imperceptible. A red light. A slowdown in the train. These things happen to us every day, and we never think of the consequences. But what if we did? What if we thought about how each micro decision we made had some massive impact down the line? I'm not talking about the butterfly effect—some rain forest a world away impacted because I sneezed. I'm talking about a real-life tornado in your own life. What could I have done differently at this moment, that moment, at any moment to keep myself from ending up here? Sitting in a bathroom thinking about how to get revenge on my husband.

But here I am.

I hold my phone and start a new text thread with the digits I memorized.

**Hey, it's me. I had to change my number. Use this one now.**

(...)

***Hey you. Why the new number?***

**I think my wife might suspect something... So, if you get any messages from my old number, just ignore them.**

**!!!**

**I know, it's okay. It'll blow over.**



I pause, feeling sick. Who is this woman? She's smiley facing my husband when he's just told her that I might be on to them. Does she feel remorse? Does she have a soul?

***When can I see you again?***

***What about tonight?***

***Serious?***

And she has bad grammar. Something Mike hates, usually.

***Serious.***

***Fantastic. Where?***

***Let me get back to you. I'm going to have to make some arrangements.***

***Okay, mystery man.***

Please don't smiley face me again, please don't smiley face me again...



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Over lunch, I can't stop myself from bringing it up. Not directly—I don't confess—but I do skirt the topic around to truthfulness, the impact of lying. It's a natural fit for our case.

“How do you think it's going?” Darnell asks. We've all ordered salads with steak strips—enough protein to keep us full for the afternoon without the carbs to lull us to sleep.

“I'm pretty happy with the jury. Seeing the consternation on Chris Top's face is just an added bonus.”

“He really seems to hate you.”

“He’s just... I’ve beaten him in court a few times. He doesn’t take losing well.”

“Here’s to this being one more time.”

“Agreed.” I put down the Diet Coke I toasted him with. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m actually feeling better. It was the anticipation that was getting to me.”

Daniel’s phone rings on the table. The office is calling. He picks it up and stands. “I’ll be right back.”

We watch him walk away.

“Do you remember what you told me when we first met?” I ask Darnell.  
“About your wife.”

Darnell looks down at his plate. “Yes. Of course.”

“Have you forgiven her?”

“I’d like to think so.”

“Is that a yes?”

“I don’t know, counselor.”

We exchange a sad-eyed look. The reason Darnell committed plagiarism in the first place, to the extent that there is a reason, was that he was suffering from severe insomnia after learning his wife was having an affair. He’d meant to rewrite it, he said. He was just dumping research into a file like he always did. But then he fell asleep and ran out of time, and the next thing he knew he was saying someone else’s words to twenty million viewers.

“Do you think forgiveness is possible?” I ask.

“You probably need to speak to a minister about that.”

“So, no, then?”

He smiles. “We’re trying to make it work. She feels terrible, especially because of everything that happened.”

“You still firm on not using that?”

“I don’t want to throw her under the bus.”

“It would help us.”

“But it wouldn’t help her and me.”

I choose my next words carefully. “Did you ever think... Did you ever think about revenge?”

“Against her?”

“No, the other guy.”

“Who says I didn’t get revenge?”

Daniel comes back to the table. “What are we talking about?”

“Forgiveness,” I say. “And possibilities.”

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Before we resume court, I text Mikhala again.

**Meet me at Summit Park?**

***What time?***

**8?**

***Sounds good.***

I smile grimly at the phone. Who is this man, this version of my husband that’s so appealing that a woman would agree to meet him in a scary park at night?

I call my assistant.

“Mia Jensen’s office.”

“Hi, Wendy. It’s me.”

“How’s the trial going?”

“Jury selection. No surprises,” I say. Though that’s not true. I’m the surprise in jury selection. Is my impulsive decision going to ruin my client’s chances of winning? My chances of partnership? If that happened it *would* be a justifiable homicide. In the minds of most women, anyway. That’s when the makeup of my jury would be important.

“Listen, I need you to do me a favor.”

“What’s that?”

“Can you get me a burner phone?”

I imagine Wendy’s face crinkling on the other end of the line. “Like...in *The Wire*?”

“Ha. No. I’m not dealing drugs.”

“I didn’t think...”

“It’s fine, I was joking. Look, I know it’s an odd request, and I can’t explain why I need it, but can you get to a store and buy me one? Use cash and I’ll

pay you back.”

“I’m not going to get in trouble, am I?”

“Of course not. Can you bring it to me in time for the afternoon break?”

“Um...”

“I promise. It’s nothing bad. Just...personal.”

And that’s when I know for sure that I’m not going to kill Mike. Or Mike either. I can’t implicate innocent Wendy in that. And I clearly need longer than five hours to turn from a corporate lawyer into a master criminal.

But I am going to make them pay.

---

Wendy brings me the burner phone during the afternoon break. I take it into the bathroom and quickly set it up. Then I enter Mike’s cell number—my Mike, is he still my Mike?—and text him something similar to what I sent his whore this morning:

***It’s me. I had to get a new phone. Can you meet me tonight?***

**Hi, you.**

I raise my hand to my mouth to keep myself from vomiting. It’s starting to feel like a ritual.

***Can you sneak out?***

**What time?**

**8?**

**Might be able to.**

***Please? I’ll make it worth your while...***

**Oh? How?**

***You know how.***



Oh God, now he’s texting smiley faces. What the hell has happened in his life that has led him to this? What the hell did I do to get him here? Was there a moment when I could’ve stopped it? If I hadn’t nagged him about being a

more involved dad. Or if I'd given him that blow job he wanted on this birthday. I'm a fixer. I fix things. I should've seen this coming. I should've stopped it.

**You still here?**

***Here.***

**Where do you want to meet?**

***How about Summit Park? It's nice and...private.***

**I'll see what I can do.**

***When will you know?***

**Give me a couple secs.**

I don't have to wonder what he's doing for long. My phone shudders in my purse. I take it out: There's a text from Mike.

**I have to work late.**

My hands shake as I answer.

***Okay.***

**My mom will watch the girls.**

***K.***

**Hope your trial's going well.**

My hands are shaking. I can't write him back. But it's not like me to simply leave a text unanswered.

Then I know what to do.



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One of the things—one—that's surprising about Mike's current situation is that he's a very private person. He doesn't want anyone to know his business. If he had to go through what Darnell did, a public shaming, thousands of people writing about him daily online, I think he'd shrivel up and float away.

That's what I've planned for him. I'll give them enough time to get cozy up

there in the woods, and then I'll call the cops. At a minimum, they'll be humiliated. Depending on how bold they've been, they might get arrested.

The real question is: Should there also be video?

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An additional advantage to my jury selection scenario? We wrap up early, our jury selected. Even though I did almost nothing today, I feel exhausted. I need some time to myself to recuperate. I need quiet.

I check in with my mother-in-law; she's taken the kids to her house, is it okay if they do a sleepover? Of course, I say, knowing that she's already packed their bags and brought them to her house, the request for permission a formality. Today, this seemed like a good idea to her. Tomorrow morning, my high-energy boys will have drained her.

I pull into the driveway and look at my house. White clapboards and black shutters—it looks like so many other houses. My life looks like so many other lives. But how can it be? And even if it is, it's my life. Mine.

I open the front door and the phone starts to ring. The landline we never had taken out because we have kids and who wants to risk it? I rush to answer it, even though no one but telemarketers call us on this phone.

"Hello?"

A breathy sound then a click. The line goes dead.

"You're home early."

I shriek and drop the phone.

"Mike! I thought you needed to work late?"

He's standing in the kitchen entrance. His eyes are dark, his arms crossed. I know in an instant that I'm busted.

And he's furious.

"Things cleared up."

"Oh! Good," I say, my voice high, fake. I take a step toward him. Why am I scared, standing here in my kitchen, when I'm not the one who's done anything?

The phone rings again.

"Leave it," he says. "It's been ringing like that for an hour."

"Why didn't you take it off the hook, then?"

He shrugs. The phone stops. Its ring seems to hang between us, filling up the

space Mike's rage is creating.

But why is he angry? I'm the one who has something to be angry about.

"Is that really what you want to talk about?" Mike asks.

"I..."

I didn't think this through. Because if I had, I would've have stopped at the humiliation. I would've thought through to Mike's reaction. What he'd do when he found out that I'd set him up. Mike has a temper. It had been so long since I'd set it off, since I'd really seen it, that I almost forgot. Another sign I'd missed. Mike didn't care about me enough anymore for me to make him angry.

Not till today.

"Did you think I didn't know what you were doing?" he asks.

"What are you talking about?"

"Come on, Mia. Don't do that. Don't pretend you don't know what's going on."

His fists were clenched, and his voice was shaking.

"Okay, I won't."

"I figured out your little plan," he says. "Getting us alone up there, filming us."

"Why would I want to film you?"

"To get evidence. You love evidence."

He's right in a way. I do love evidence. I love putting together puzzles and proving my theory of the case. But that's when the facts involve someone else. Not when they're about me.

"I think I had a right."

"A right?" he says, taking a step closer. "A right?"

His face is distorted. I have trouble recognizing him.

And that's when I know. I made a mistake here. I'm in danger.

Mike takes another step toward me.

The phone rings.

No one answers.

# THE ARCHAEOLOGIST

REBECCA DRAKE

THE DESERT IS TIMELESS. IT preserves and erases, covering up or wearing away any object that settles on it. Looking at it is like gazing across a vast ocean, wave after wave of rippling sand, stretching endlessly toward the horizon.

It's almost three o'clock in the afternoon—that's hell in the Sahara in June. I'm driving outside of Luxor, away from the far reaches of the Valley of the Kings, and conscious that the SUV is a metal box, absorbing heat. I had to pull my sleeve down to open the door handle to avoid burning my skin. It's over 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

The excavation site is behind me, and I can't help looking back in my rearview mirror, although I know there is no one following. I have the AC on full blast and I can still feel the heat. Nobody travels in the desert in midafternoon at this time of year if they can help it. My hands are clenched on the wheel, my neck is stiff. The knot in my stomach won't loosen, and my mind won't stop replaying what happened.

The day didn't start like this.

## Nine Hours Earlier...

I wake, as I do every morning in Egypt, to the azan. It can be hauntingly beautiful, the call to prayer, although not so much when it's a plethora of voices competing to be heard from multiple minarets. I've learned Arabic well enough to follow along. The first call of the day always includes this line: *As-salatu khayrun minan-nawm*—*Prayer is better than sleep*.

"That's debatable," Jenny says as we pass each other in the hallway of our rented house. "I'm praying for another hour or two of rest." But she says it with a smile, moving out of my way so I can take my turn in the cramped bathroom.

The tile floor is cool under my feet. All the floors are tiled, different colors and patterns—yellow starbursts in the bedroom I share with Jenny and Lenor. We try to keep the house free of the ubiquitous sand, leaving our boots in a dusty pile near the front door, although it's hard with five of us. Khaled and Patrick share a room and bath across the hall from ours.

We leave for the excavation site early, like we do every morning, because it's cooler then, and morning is the only tolerable time of day to be outside. We haul lots of bottled water and sunscreen, and equip ourselves with hats to block the sun, and masks and scarves to keep the dust out of our mouths and eyes. The sun is just beginning to rise as we head out, an ominous orange sliver.

The excavation is beyond the West Bank of the Nile opposite Luxor, but it might as well be another planet. Luxor is relatively quiet compared to Cairo, but it's still a city and a tourist mecca. On our way to work we pass the horse-drawn caleches that carry tourists from hotels to Karnak and other famous sites, before we join the traffic crossing the bridge over the great river.

We leave behind the noise of the city and soon enter a stillness that is broken only by our own conversations and the sound of shovels and trowels.

When I first came to the desert I found the sameness alarming. Sand as far as the eye could see, everything a bland beige. It was only over time that I noticed the subtle color gradations and learned to spot the rare desert flower or the occasional wind-whipped, wizened tree.

I've come to appreciate the peace of the desert. The silence. Certainly, it's better than the cacophony of Egypt's cities. Especially Cairo, with its madness

of a million honking horns and crushing hordes of people.

Dr. Adley met all of us at the airport there, striding across the crowded terminal, instantly recognizable with his shock of silver white hair, hawk-like nose, and craggy, sunbaked skin. “Call me Richard,” he said with his plummy English accent, animated and imposing, well over six feet tall and towering over everyone except Patrick. I’m surprised and almost giddy—the great Egyptologist asked me to call him by his first name! That he hugged all the women, but not the men, didn’t register in the moment.

We’d barely arrived, but Dr. Adley—Richard—insisted on driving us around the city’s various famous sites, including Khan el-Khalili, the five of us graduate students and postdocs hiking around in cargo pants and work boots, dressed for the field rather than Cairo’s ancient bazaar.

It’s a wonderful place, with old stone archways and winding passages, and a hundred different shops all piled high with ankhs and hieroglyphic jewelry or papyrus scrolls—the items the tourists buy—as well as more mundane household goods. Shopkeepers in caftans and *thobes* called from the doorways, speaking broken English along with their Arabic. “Here, lady, best for you,” a man cried, pointing at the rainbow array of pashminas on the wall behind him. Another shopkeeper waved a blue scarab amulet in my face.

My gaze jumped from one bright object to the next, my head rang with the noise. It was like trying to take a sip of water from a fast-running hose, the liquid splashing and spilling, impossible to contain. Or being released from a dimly lit room into the hard light of day, so bright that your eyes burn and you have to retreat, blinking and tearing because it’s just too much.

Now I know that this is exactly how Richard wanted us to feel. He cultivates that off-balance sensation in his subordinates. Ignore our jet lag ostensibly to show us the fun bits of Egypt, but wasn’t it also an early and easy way to establish his superior knowledge and dominance in this unfamiliar country?

For five of us, coming from the relative quiet of American campuses, it was quite the culture shock. Only Khaled was used to it, working as he had before with Richard. I’d been living in New England, in an orderly college town with Puritan roots and Yankee stoicism. All the noise and brilliance that is Egypt came as a complete surprise.

But even feeling as overwhelmed as I did that first day couldn't crush my euphoria. This is where I'd been wanting and waiting to be for years, the place I'd dreamed about ever since first studying the pharaohs in elementary school. It's taken me a long time to get to here, and I was over the moon to receive this postdoctoral fellowship. I leapt at the chance, and nothing, not even the relative poverty and chaos of Egypt, could persuade me that this experience would be anything less than wondrous.

After a week spent studying the Cairo Museum's massive collection of antiquities, as well as visiting the great pyramids at Giza, we flew south to Luxor, the ancient city of Thebes, to begin our fieldwork.

The guesthouse Richard arranged for us is about a forty-minute ride from the dig. An older woman named Hoda comes to clean for us weekly and doesn't seem to feel any of the discomfort that I do when I pass her energetically sweeping the rooms, or down on her hands and knees scrubbing the floors. She *tut-tuts* over the state of our nearly empty fridge, or about the dishes that we leave piled in the sink when we're too tired to do anything at the end of the day but eat whatever we've scrounged before shelling out of our filthy clothing and falling into bed.

Our daily diet is simple. A lot of *ful medames* and falafel, flatbread and hummus. All of it washed down with bottled water or juice and lots of strong, cardamom-laced coffee. I long for fresh vegetables, but it isn't safe to eat them except at bigger hotels.

But these things don't matter because we're not here for the food or even Egypt's vibrant city life. We're here to immerse ourselves in the past, and every morning, as we arrive at the site, I feel a sense of excitement, even though I know it's unlikely that anything of real significance will be found.

This is most days in archaeology, if I'm honest. There's a lot of prep work. Careful surveys and calibrations made. Areas measured and organized in grids so that we don't miss anything. And lots and lots of repetitive digging and sifting of dirt.

The truth is that excavation archaeology is lots of tedious dirty work interspersed with some fantastic moments that you feed on for weeks, or even months or years, until you make another discovery.

The very first time I found something, I was so elated. It was a broken piece

from a glazed pot, and I soon uncovered its matching parts nearby. Unearthing that small shard was so satisfying. I can remember how my hands shook as I pulled it from the ground. You live for these amazing moments. We haven't had many of them at this site, or at least not enough for Richard.

We've been working for over an hour before he shows up. He comes later than we do every day, the privilege of being in charge, his arrival heralded by music blasting from an ancient boom box he insists on bringing. I wouldn't mind so much if his musical tastes hadn't shuddered to a halt in the disco era. "If he plays 'Stayin' Alive' one more time, *he* won't be alive much longer," Patrick says as we hear the Land Rover, and Richard's favorite soundtrack, approaching.

He parks near our cars and jams his desert hat on his head before striding toward us, boom box in tow. He sets it down and dons some gloves. "Is this as far as you've gotten?" he says, looking down at me and Patrick, both hard at work with pickax and shovel in one of the outlying trenches. We are over five feet down and sweating. "Pick up the pace."

"Like we're ditchdiggers," I mutter to Patrick. He nods grimly, his face dripping sweat and red despite the wide-brimmed canvas hat with caping that he always wears. Of all of us, he's most at risk, because he's a redheaded Irishman, with skin so milky white that it fries to a crisp under the relentless sun. He slathers sunscreen on himself but still has patches of reddened, peeling skin. We've got a couple of canopies set up over other sections but haven't moved one to this spot yet.

"I'm glad to see that you're actually doing some work today." Richard's voice carries over his music, but this time he's snapping at Jenny, who's in the midst of bagging some shards. She stiffens but doesn't respond. A few days ago, Richard caught her texting and went ballistic. "You're not paid to sit on your damned arse," he yelled. "Get off that mobile and do some work!"

No one said anything, even though she was only taking a well-earned break. Richard is the great Egyptologist, and no one dares to contradict him.

I'd heard about his reputation for being frank. I think he's built a career cultivating the image of himself as a straight-shooting, outspoken adventurer. His British version of Indiana Jones helps him raise funding, especially in non-archaeological circles. Of course, this behavior is acceptable only for him.

None of us can speak as bluntly; like most bullies, he can't handle it. He's a great critic of other people's work, but he can't abide being critiqued himself. Lenor once dared to mention that he'd missed a spot when he was cleaning a small vase, and he retaliated by making her recheck every artifact already cataloged since she had "superior sight."

He saves most of his wit and all of his charm for the public; we rarely see his jovial side. I never imagined he'd be so autocratic, but it's his behavior toward women that makes me tense whenever I see him.

The first time he touched me, I thought it was an accident. We were down in one of the tombs in Luxor, my first visit to the great Valley of the Kings, and his hand grazed my breast, lingering long enough to be uncomfortable, but short enough that I questioned my own perception. The place was crowded with tourists, but he didn't care if people saw, actually using the number of people as a cover, which shows you his brazenness.

He does this with all his female subordinates. I know now that he looked as much at our photos as he did our field experience when he selected this team. All attractive young women, and there were four females when we started. Marie, a graduate student from California, left after two weeks. She wouldn't say why, but now I'm convinced it was because of Richard. Of course, he brought on Khaled and Patrick, too—perhaps he included them so he can't be accused of the very favoritism he shows. All I know is that he doesn't touch the men, nothing more than the occasional manly clap on the shoulder or a hearty handshake. They don't say anything about his groping, even though they've witnessed it. None of us say anything, and that is because of his prestige in our field.

"Watch what you're doing there," he calls now, my stomach dropping as he climbs down into the trench with me and Patrick. "It's too much—you've got to have a lighter touch when you dig." It's absurd. If anyone is being too rough it's Patrick, who outweighs me by a good thirty pounds at least, but I hide my indignation, trying to hand over the shovel so Richard can demonstrate.

He shakes his head. "No, no, you have to get the feel of it." He steps behind me, reaching around to put his hands over mine on the shovel, his body close and hot against me, his groin pressed tight against my backside.

Patrick shoots me a sympathetic look and clears his throat. “Richard, what do you think of this?” An attempt to distract him, but our boss doesn’t budge.

“Just a minute, Patrick,” Richard says without looking, rubbing my shoulder with his free hand. “Relax, you’re too tight—you’ll strain something.”

Bile rises in my throat and I swallow it down as he makes me lift the shovel and dig into the limestone and sand at my feet. “That’s it, you’re doing well,” Richard says, his breath hot against my ear. After a minute that feels like an hour, he releases me with one of his characteristic barking laughs. “You can’t rely on that pretty face forever.”

He steps away, and I wonder if he could feel my body trembling. My free hand balls into a fist, and all I want to do is swing the shovel as hard as I can and silence his stupid laugh. I think Patrick sees it in my face, because he quickly steps between us. Richard is oblivious, climbing the ladder up and out, going in search of other prey. I hear him lecturing Lenor next.

It’s barely eight o’clock, but I think I smelled booze on his breath. Perhaps it’s just oozing from his pores. He’s been drinking really heavily for the last few weeks, and he’s a nasty drunk.

“Did you want to work in Egypt because you’re a blonde?” he said to me one evening, apropos of nothing except that I’d quietly evaded an advance. “I’m sure you get more attention here than you do in the States.”

His insult notwithstanding, it’s true that I get more looks here than anywhere else I’ve traveled. I’m tall, blond, and blue-eyed, which means that I can’t easily blend in anywhere except Germany and Scandinavia. Perhaps I should have studied Nordic cultures. Certainly, as I’m standing in this 120-degree heat, I wonder why I hadn’t found the study of cold cultures more appealing.

Richard likes my hair; he told me so. It’s typical of him to think it’s okay to comment on women’s appearances, but he’s certainly not alone in that. I’ve dealt with sexism before—it’s not like these incidents are rare or limited to academia. You get used to dealing with it if you’re a woman. It becomes something like second nature to watch out and ward off unwanted male attention. I couldn’t begin to count the number of clumsy passes at parties, or the inappropriate comments. Once, on an early morning commuter train, a conductor singled me out, demanding, “Why aren’t you smiling? Let’s see a smile from you.” I was the only woman in the carriage, and he didn’t ask this

of any of the other passengers, the men left undisturbed in their half-awake states. Only I was required to be “on” for this man, to smile for him if I wanted my ticket punched.

I pause to wipe my brow and climb out of the trench to get a bottle of water. Richard is examining something nearby, frowning at whatever Khaled is holding. I notice Jenny is standing behind them, using Khaled as a wall between her and Richard.

It doesn't help that our dig has not been going particularly well. Of course we all hoped it would yield more, perhaps an important tomb, but so far it's been little but a cache of relatively insignificant artifacts.

Worse, it took Richard much longer than expected to secure the permits and permissions needed for the excavation, and that's put us behind. We should be gone from here by now.

We all celebrated with champagne at the house when he announced that the final government clearance had come. That was also the night that Richard insisted on dancing with each of the female students, telling Patrick to turn up the music on the radio. It was an Egyptian station, and the singing was accompanied by the rhythmic beat of drums. “This is Nubian folk music,” he said, springing up from the couch. “You've got to move to it.” He grabbed my hand, pulling me up to join him and whirling me around and around before releasing me to do the same with Jenny. I tensed when his hand snaked around the lowest part of my back, slipping for a moment under my shirt, but I shifted him off without saying anything. There was a lot of alcohol flowing—the champagne as well as six-packs of Stella.

It was much less excusable some weeks later when he walked in on me in the shower. Fieldwork is so dirty, and no matter how much my body might ache, at the end of a long day I really like to clean off the grime. I'd latched the bathroom door, but it jiggles loose if tugged on hard enough. I was standing there, trying to rinse off under the tepid spray, when he burst in. The shower has a clear glass enclosure, so he could see me fully. He stopped in the doorway, staring open-mouthed, while I stared back in shock, trying to cover my nakedness with my hands, before I found the presence of mind to cry, “Get out!” He retreated backward, mumbling, “Sorry, I didn't realize you were in here,” finally averting his gaze as he pulled the door closed behind

him.

I've heard from Jenny and Lenor that he's done this to them, too. Walking in on them bathing or dressing. Touching them in intimate or inappropriate places, but most of it done in ways that make it hard to challenge.

In this Richard isn't alone, and he's not the first threatening, boorish man that any of us have encountered.

His clumsy groping could even seem penny-ante and something fairly easy to rebuff if it weren't for the power he wields. We don't challenge him because we're afraid to—his recommendation could make or break our futures. There's a glut of archaeologists and too few faculty positions. I'm not the only one here hoping to parlay this experience into a job offer at a university back in the States.

And he's skillful enough that most of his behavior is hard to challenge. Down in the tomb, for instance, his hand moved from my breast to my elbow, as if all along he'd been intending to direct me closer to the painting running along the walls and up onto the ceiling, all of it still vivid and vibrant though it was thousands of years old. And as Richard identified the different gods and goddesses and explained the journey to the afterlife that the art depicted, I could feel my heart racing for another reason, as enamored as I'd been the first time I ever heard him speak.

It had been during an East Coast lecture circuit back when I was an undergrad, and I vividly recall how I stood in the back for over two hours, part of the standing-room-only crowd, completely rapt as he spun stories about his most famous digs that were as exciting as any thriller.

I can't reconcile my respect and admiration for this man who'd been my idol with his moments of wildly inappropriate behavior. At first it was easier to assume that I'd misread the situation and his touch was inadvertent. Until there were just too many of these times to excuse. As a species, humans have a hard time holding two wildly disparate opinions of the same person—we want clear demarcations between good and evil. It's difficult to accept that someone can be both a genius and a predator.

I got back to digging, trying to channel my anger into the work, letting it give me energy. I pretend that I'm shoveling snow, trying to remember winter, lost in what now seems like a delightful memory of freezing, when my

shovel suddenly sinks farther into the ground than it should, and I hear a strange noise. It's a weird *thunk*, like a melon splitting, and I don't feel the distinctive arm-ache of shovel hitting rock. I stop, my focus fully back in the boiling hot present, and heft the shovel, which seems harder to pull up. I sink it again, and again there's that distinct, strange sound, and this time the handle of the shovel moves, just a little, in my hands, appearing to slip into the ground. I haul it out again, and lean the shovel against the dirt wall, before crouching down and impatiently brushing away the crumbling sand and rock to see what I've hit. It's a gash, a jagged opening. I stifle a cry, gloved hand flying to my mouth. Patrick doesn't notice. He's busy wielding the pickaxe, his back to me. I don't want to say anything until I'm sure—I certainly don't want to risk Richard's wrath—but if this is what I think it is, then there'll be no containing it, and all too soon it won't be my discovery alone.

I grab the shovel again and wield it as tenderly as if tapping a spoon against crème brûlée. The gap widens, like an eggshell cracking, and I pause to brush the debris away again before continuing. I go on like this for a few precious minutes, until the opening is wider than my arm. I know this because I can't resist kneeling down and sticking my hand into the hole. Oddly, I have no fear of what I might touch, the way I ordinarily would when reaching blindly. All I feel is elation, because I know, even before I've swept the cavity, my hand brushing the still air without hitting sides or bottom, I know that this is what we've been waiting and hoping to find. A tomb.

"Mia? What is it? What have you found?" Patrick's excited voice shatters the silence, and then everyone is there at once, hanging along the ledge, as I scramble to my feet and Richard practically leaps down the short ladder, yelling that he alone can join us in the trench. He pushes roughly past me as if I'm nothing more than a sheep in the way, like the flocks that always seem to block local roads when we're in a hurry. This indifferent touch is as insulting as the last one; I'm at once livid and protective. This is my find—mine, not his.

He kneels by the crevice like I did, dipping his hand into the opening like a thirsty man lowering a bucket into a well, before he thinks to pull out his smartphone and use the flashlight feature to peer into the cavity. Without looking up, he calls, "Quick, Khaled, get me the torch from my Jeep."

Khaled sprints off without a word, back quicker than one would think possible in this heat, and he goes to pass it down himself, but Patrick wrestles it from him at the side of the tomb. I'm the one who hands Richard the flashlight, which he takes without a glance. Lenor is already snapping photos, recording the discovery. Everyone wants to be part of this moment.

"It's a burial chamber," Richard announces after a minute, and my heart leaps again. This makes all the hard work worth it, this moment. "There's at least one set of remains in there; I can see it."

He gets to his feet and he's grinning ear to ear, a wide boyish smile that we've rarely seen, and in his gleaming eyes I see something that is also akin to relief. This is unlikely to be a major find, but it's something. The dig won't have been in vain.

We spend the remainder of the day taking turns working in the trench, Richard carefully expanding the opening at its widest point, while the rest of us work along the edges. It's slow and painstaking. As archaeologists, we're always aware that what we do is destructive, and we move with the deliberation we've all been taught, which is at odds with the excitement practically crackling in the air, like heat lightning.

None of us notice that the sun has climbed to its highest point in the sky until Richard finally takes a break, fetching a kerchief from his pocket to mop the sweat dripping from his face. That's contagious, like a yawn. I'm aware, suddenly, that I'm also dripping, sweat flowing down every part of my body like the branches of a river.

"We need to quit for the day," Richard says, but I shake my head.

"No, not yet." I haven't dared to contradict him before, the euphoria over my find responsible for my bravado, and I cringe immediately after, bracing myself for a sharp rebuttal.

But he doesn't react. "We can't—we risk heatstroke," he says, with a nod toward Patrick, who is looking even paler than usual, his breathing the heavy panting of a dog in summer.

"Plus, we need to save some energy to celebrate," Richard adds, which brings a cheer from the others.

We'll have dinner at one of Luxor's finer restaurants, just like we did after our first day at the dig, when our energy and hopes were also riding high.

There will be lots of tourists milling about, and undoubtedly some of them will want to snap photos with our group, just like they did last time. Lenor and Jenny are already discussing what they've got that's both clean and nice enough to wear. The others are gathering up the equipment, shutting down for the day and moving toward the cars, but I don't want to leave, not yet. I'm waiting for Richard to climb out of the trench so I can be alone once more to savor this moment.

But he's waiting for me to go, waving me toward the ladder with a courtesy that I'd have found suspect at any other time, but the look on his face is compassionate, not leering. "I remember my first time," he says in a conspiratorial tone. "It's an incredible feeling, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's amazing." I'm suddenly tongue-tied and overwhelmed, unable to express the depth of emotion, but he seems to understand.

"It never goes away—that's the great thing. It's not as pure, of course, as the first one, but the confidence you gain over time gives you a satisfaction that makes all the subsequent discoveries grow in sweetness."

It's the first time he's talked to me like a colleague in all the months I've been working with him. It's the sort of conversation I'd dreamed of having with him before I came to Egypt, and all I can do is smile and bob my head repeatedly in acknowledgment, like a child lapping at melting ice cream, desperate not to lose a single drop.

"Mia, are you coming?"

I tear my gaze from Richard's face and look up at Lenor, who's waiting for me at the top.

"You can all go ahead," Richard says to her. "Mia and I will be right behind you."

She looks from him to me, her lips thinning like they do when she's concerned, but she doesn't know that things are different now, that he is different.

"Yes, go ahead," I manage to say, laughing a little with giddiness, but touched when she hesitates, not moving until I repeat myself. "It's okay, go on."

She disappears from view, and I hear her calling to Jenny and then the sound in the distance of car doors slamming and an engine revving before they drive

away.

“Did you want to see the sarcophagus?” Richard offers, pulling the flashlight out of a back pocket. He extends it to me and I take it, walking over to the cavity and dropping down beside it, spreading full length across the rough ground, heedless of any discomfort. Our work has widened the gap; it’s now close to two feet across in one section. I switch on the flashlight and hang my arm down in the darkness, the glow bouncing around the chamber until I steady it. I inch forward, my head over the side, craning to see as I sweep the light over the interior. After a moment I spot what at first I mistake for a small rectangular box. I sweep past it and then back, exclaiming as I realize that these are the remains.

“Do you think it’s a child?” I ask, struggling to fathom that something so small could hold what was once a fully grown human being.

“Perhaps, or it could be a woman.” Richard kneels beside me, his voice as hushed as mine, as if we are in a temple or some other sacred space, which in a way it is. “Perhaps the wife of a minor official. Here, pass me the torch,” he says, reaching out a hand. “I’ll hold it while you try to get a picture—your eyesight is probably sharper than mine.”

He hands me his phone as I pass him the flashlight, and then he stretches alongside me, his body close against mine as he shines the light back into the hole. Clutching the phone with both hands, I reach down into the opening and move my arms around, stretching and craning my neck, until I’ve got the sarcophagus in view. I’m concentrating hard on focusing and taking at least one clear shot. Something slithers against my lower back, sliding down to the bare skin where my T-shirt has ridden up, and I startle, crying out, only to realize it’s Richard, who moves fast, his hand dropping to cup my ass.

I roll away from him, his phone falling, forgotten, from my fingers and plunging down into the chamber. “Get off me!” I cry, trying to shove him away, but he resists, raking his fingers against me, clenching me in a bruising grip. His face is up against mine, his breath hot on me, and he’s still smiling.

“Relax, just relax,” he murmurs, as if I’m a shying horse he’s trying to settle, and he brings his other hand up to touch my face, letting the flashlight clatter harmlessly behind me. He kisses me, pulling my body toward him, but I bend my right leg at ninety degrees and slam my knee, as hard and fast as I can, into

his groin.

He lets go immediately, rolling onto his back and clutching his crotch, cursing me even as he struggles to get up and away. “You bloody bitch! What the hell did you do that for?”

I don’t bother answering such a stupid question, breathing hard as I stagger to my own feet. I’m swearing, too, cursing my own stupidity for letting my guard down around him.

He’s looking around frantically, just now noticing that his phone is missing. “What did you do with it? Did you drop it down there, you stupid cow?”

That sounds like a rhetorical question, too, and I head for the ladder, suddenly hyperaware that I’m down here alone with him, and feeling as if I’m trapped in the wild-cat enclosure at a zoo.

He pays no attention to me, grabbing the flashlight before it’s kicked through the opening and shining it down in the gaping hole again, crouching on the side like an overgrown frog, trying to spy his phone.

“There! I see it,” he cries, and he shoots upright, looking around, clearly trying to think of something he can use to get it out. “Fetch me that shovel.” A command, pointing at the tool lying up top on the far side of the trench.

“Fetch it yourself.” I wince at the pain from the road rash peppering my side after grappling with him. My ass cheek is smarting; I can feel the imprint of his hand like a brand. I start up the ladder, but he calls my name, his voice like a shot, and I stop.

“If you leave now, you’re done,” he says, each word like a slap. “You can pack up your bags and drive straight to the airport, because you’ll never set foot on my site again.”

His site. His. It’s as if everything that happened today never took place—that I didn’t find the tomb, that I’ve contributed nothing and never will. Oh, I knew from the start of this project that he’d take credit for this dig, that his name would be the lead on any research paper we published, but mine would be there, too, Mia Grace Jensen, right there, for everyone to see. And now he’s threatening to take even that away from me, and as I stare into his craggy, unforgiving face, I believe him.

It’s only a few steps from where I’m standing to fetch the shovel, but it feels like it takes forever, my pride smarting along with my skin. I could kill him;

that thought scuttles through my mind like a scorpion. I let it go and hand him the shovel before retreating.

His plan doesn't work. He can reach the bottom, but not with enough leverage to scoop anything. He finally gives up, hurling the shovel back over the side of the trench in frustration. I make a mental note of where it lands, because I'm sure I'll be tasked with retrieving it once he abandons this fruitless effort and we can finally leave.

"I'm going down there."

"What?" I look over at him, startled. He's standing at the edge like Superman, legs akimbo and hands at his sides, staring down into the pit. "That's crazy."

"It's not that deep—I can get down there easily enough, but I'll need your help getting back. There's rope in my car." He tosses me his car keys, not even bothering to ask this time if I'll fetch it.

"It's too risky—you don't know if it's stable."

But he's already sitting down and swinging his legs over the side, the great Egyptologist at it again. I turn away, shaking my head as I climb up the ladder.

I've only taken a few steps toward the car when I hear the second strange noise of the day. It's a rumble at first, like distant thunder, but there's not a rain cloud in the sky. It's followed by a loud crack, like a tree split by lightning, and I turn back just as Richard gives a high-pitched, decidedly unmanly scream.

I run to the edge of the trench, only to retreat, coughing wildly, as a mushroom cloud of dust rises from it, obscuring everything. I squint, coughing and waving my hands, trying to see through the haze. When it finally settles, I climb carefully down the ladder and cautiously approach the edge of the jagged opening, peering over the side. Apparently my concerns were justified—a section of the floor of the chamber has given way and Richard has fallen through it, plunging deep into an abyss and triggering some type of cave-in. All I can make out in the darkness is jagged chunks of rock. And then I hear moaning, a ghostly sound, before Richard speaks, his voice so faint and far away that I can barely hear it.

"Mia? Are you there? Get help." The moaning starts again, and then he calls, "I've been crushed. I'm bleeding. Get help."

I don't reply, standing there in silence for a long minute before climbing slowly back up the ladder and walking toward the car.

It surprises me to see the Jeep standing next to his Land Rover. Lenor must have insisted on leaving it for me, the four of them all crowding into the second small SUV for the trip back to the city. She'd obviously had the presence of mind to stop me from being dependent on Richard for a ride.

I climb into the driver's seat and start the engine, backing out and turning the wheel hard before driving away, up the makeshift road we've created across this stretch of desert.

The ancient Egyptians believed that after death a soul must face the judgment of Osiris, who placed the heart on a great golden scale, weighing it against the feather of truth. If the heart was light, the soul could continue on its journey into the afterlife. But if the heart was heavy, a monstrous god with crocodile jaws would devour it, and the soul would simply cease to exist.

My phone rings, vibrating in the console where I left it this morning, and I flinch at the sound, glancing down at the screen and recognizing Jenny's number. I know she's wondering about the delay, they all probably are, everyone eager to start the evening's celebration. The phone rings and rings, but I don't answer.

The desert is far behind me now, a distant shimmer under the afternoon sun. It will cover us all eventually, layer upon layer of shifting sand and stone, until one day, thousands of years from now, when someone comes to dig us up and wonder how we met our fate.

# THE HOMELESS WOMAN

KERRY LONSDALE

THE BRAKES ON SAL'S WASTE management truck sound like a moose call, or rusty, old hinges. They rattle deep inside my head, jarring me awake as they do every Tuesday morning at 5:25 a.m. Clockwork. Too bad the owner of the French bistro I slept behind isn't as consistent with the leftovers he puts out for the stray alley cats. Pierre's porch was empty last night. So is my stomach this morning. The neglected, hollow cavern grumbles in irritation.

Rubbing the sleep crust from my eyes, I blink against the truck's glaring headlights. They spotlight me in the dim alley, and for a moment, I'm back onstage. Fantine in *Les Misérables*. Adored by a theater of fans, not despised by everyone who crosses my path. I catch a glimpse of my emaciated frame cast on the garbage bin behind me and see my stooped, crooked shadow. A hunchback as ugly and pitiful as the one in Notre Dame.

I shy away from the sight of me. But I love the hulking bin filled with trash. Grateful for its wide berth. It blocks the wind, and last night's chilling gusts neared intolerable. Almost. I'm still alive, and as far as I can tell, my digits are intact. I wiggle my toes, and my big toe pokes through the hole in my sock. The nail scrapes the inside of my worn shoe. I look at my feet. *Oh, good. No one stole my boots last night.* Purple galoshes I snagged off the curb, abandoned

by the previous owner. They're still on.

So are the truck's high beams.

I flip off the driver.

He leans out the window. "Move it, lady."

"Ease up, Mike. I know her." Sal's door opens. He hops down and approaches me with a knowing look. Disappointment. I see it on him every week.

I push to my feet and stand on my cardboard mattress. My legs are stiff and achy from a long night spent on a hard surface in the cold. Sal stops a few feet from me. I can't meet his eyes.

"Morning, Sal."

"Mia, you promised you'd go to St. Margaret's."

"Yep. I did. And I do, every week. You ask me to go, and I promise I will." I scratch my greasy head through a hole in my knit cap.

"Yet here you are, sleeping on the ground."

"Uh-huh, that's right." I nod, my head bouncing like one of those bobble toys I found in the trash can at the park. Bending over, I pick up my cardboard, fold it in half, and tuck it behind Pierre's empty kegs. With any luck, it'll be there tonight and I won't have to waste time looking for another mattress.

Sal lifts his cap and scratches behind his ear. He reminds me of a dog, with his full cheeks and droopy eyes. He shakes his head at me, eyes shining with pity. They all pity me, unless they despise me. Disgusted by the sight and stink of me. I don't need a mirror to know I'm a fright to look at.

"Hurry up, Sal. We're falling behind schedule," Mike complains.

"Give me a sec," Sal yells back. "You're on private property," he tells me, his tone concerned. "Don't make me call the police on you again."

"I won't." Waving him off, I glance at the ground, turning full circle, looking for anything I might have left behind. I touch my head and confirm my knit cap is on. *Yep, still there.* I hold out my hands. *Mittens are there, too.* My right pinky finger pokes through, and I frown. I need new gloves. Tomorrow, I decide. It's the third Wednesday of the month. Donation day. People leave plastic bags stuffed with treasure on their stoops to be picked up by the donation van. Easy pickings for vagrants.

I grin at my plan, and Sal backs up a step. My smile falls, hiding the gaps in my mouth. I've lost a couple of teeth these past months.

"The weather app says it's below freezing tonight. Get inside or you'll die out here."

Freezing to death would be the easy way out. I don't deserve shortcuts. I also don't want Sal to call the cops. They'll put me in a heated jail cell. A comfort I'm no longer entitled to.

"Let's get on with it. Move, lady. We don't have all day," Mike bellows.

"I'm going, I'm going," I screech. I'll find another alley. One that isn't on Sal's and Asshole Mike's route. They'll never see me again.

*Darn. I'll have to hunt for more cardboard again.*

A touch of sadness wafts over me like a light breeze, slowing me down as I walk away from Sal. From my favorite alley and Pierre's alley cat special. I kind of liked Sal.

"Mia," Sal calls to me. He points to the tiny glass figurines aligned against the wall. A cat, a spotted dog, and a pony with a yellow saddle.

I gasp. How could I have forgotten them? How could I forget *her*? Sunshine yellow hair and cornflower-blue eyes. Cheeks tinged pink, the color of her favorite Sunday dress. The image of her is so clear in my mind, it's almost as though she's with me again.

But she's not, and she never will be.

A low mewling vibrates in the back of my throat. I rush to the figurines and thrust them into my coat pocket, the garment threadbare and missing buttons. The Marc Jacobs label fell off long ago. The wool coat had once been beautiful, the red fabric lush. I'd worn it to the opera house. Garrett had taken me to see *Madame Butterfly* for our fifth anniversary.

Lost in memories, I start walking, humming Puccini's atmospheric notes. Mike stares impatiently at me from his perch above in the truck's cab.

"Hold up a sec, Mia," Sal says.

Mike tosses up his hands in exasperation.

Sal goes to the truck and opens a cooler. He grabs a white paper bag and holds it out so that the golden arches face me. I smell eggs and sausage and almost sigh in ecstasy.

I reach for the bag. Sal yanks it away.

“It’s yours on one condition.” He holds up a wide finger dusted with black hair. “You get yourself to the shelter tonight. Promise me,” he adds, his tone more serious than I’ve heard before.

“Promise.” I make a grab for the white bag with the most beautiful arches in the world.

He steps back, keeping the bag from reach. “I’m going there tonight, and I’m going to look for you.”

My gaze lurches up to his. “You’re going to visit the shelter?” Nobody cared enough to check up on me.

“I’m trying to help you. I’ve been trying to help you.”

I retreat, tucking my hands in my pockets so I don’t grab for the bag. I don’t want his help. I don’t want anyone’s help. But dammit, I’m hungry.

“Will you be there tonight?” Sal asks.

My stomach growls. His eyebrow arches.

“Yeah, I’ll be there.” I snag the bag and dart away. My hand is in the bag, unwrapping the Egg McMuffin before I exit the alley, and I devour the sandwich in four large bites. I’m done before I reach the street corner.

I walk from one block to another, around corner after corner. Taxi horns and police sirens are an orchestra of sharp notes as the city wakes up. Steam rises and hisses from the subway vents underneath me. Bacon fries and eggs scramble in the apartment buildings I pass. I try not to think how my mornings used to be, but my mind still goes there, missing the sound of running water as Garrett showered and the scent of coffee brewing in the kitchen downstairs. The hard, cold surface under my worn soles used to be varnished walnut and travertine tiles. We lived in a beautiful home once. I loved that home. Once.

I pass old haunts. The newspaper stand where I’d pick up the week’s *New Yorker* magazine. I’d read it cover to cover, linger over “Around Town,” my favorite section. One day, I used to think, my name would stare back at me in print. The lead role in the latest off-Broadway production.

I pass the coffee shop where I’d purchase a caramel macchiato every afternoon. My mouth salivates, and my gait slows. A light tapping on glass draws my attention, and I stop, seeking out the noise. There, on the other side of the window, a young girl sits, fidgeting in her chair, her fingernail

scratching on the glass, hair as fair as Heather's. She eats breakfast with her parents. A warm buttered croissant and hot chocolate. It's what I would have ordered for Heather.

This little girl shows me her back as she turns from the window to play with her toys on the table, little figurines identical to the ones resting in my pocket. My hand closes around them as the scene inside the coffee shop reels me back to when I was the woman dressed in a fine blouse with a rope of pearls around my neck, sitting across from my husband in his tailored suit. I think of Garrett and our beautiful, vibrant daughter, Heather, playing with her figurines. Garrett and I, poring over pictures of a house that had come on the market. The one at the end of a street, on top of a hill. The one that overlooked the city that I'd admired since I was a little girl.

"I'm not sure we can afford it," I said, even though living in that house had been a dream of mine for as long as I could remember. And Garrett knew that. He had known since before we married.

Garrett clicked through the photos, landing on a picture of the sprawling master bath. "You've always wanted this house, and I want to give it to you. We'll make it work. With my promotion and your extra hours teaching—"

"Plus my acting," I added. Garrett swung his gaze to mine and locked on, a question in his expression. I smiled, radiant. I couldn't contain my excitement. "I landed the role of Fantine at the regional theater. That'll give us a smidge more income." I spread my thumb and index finger an inch apart.

Garrett corralled me in his embrace. "That's amazing, Mia." He kissed me and I melted against him. "I'm proud of you. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I only heard this morning," I said, breathless.

"This calls for a celebration. We're going to place an offer on this house right now. What do you think about that?"

"Are you sure?" I was nervous. The mortgage would be triple what we were already paying on our shoebox-sized condo.

"I'm more than sure." He lifted my chin so that I couldn't look anywhere else but deep into his stormy gray eyes. "We can accomplish anything as long as we're together. Us against the world, baby."

A thwack on the window jolts me back to my damp, miserable present. A man's face appears before me, scowling, his mouth twisted in derision. The

little blond girl beside him gawks at me, petrified.

“Move on,” the man yells through the glass.

Between us, I catch a glimpse of my haggard reflection and gasp, stumbling backward.

I’m hideous, no better than Victor Frankenstein’s monster. Revolting and destitute, and it’s no one’s fault but my own. I deserve this lot in life.

The little girl’s father stares me down. *Don’t look at me.* I shirk away, pulling the hood of my Marc Jacobs over my knit cap. Dashing off, I turn left at the corner, my direction opposite that of St. Margaret’s.

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The sun is high and shadows short when I sit on my favorite bench at the park. It faces the playground and is made of real wood, not the recycled plastic that burns bare skin when it absorbs the sun’s intense heat during the sweltering months of summer. Scooting to the far end of the bench, I rest my elbow on the iron scroll handrail and make room for whomever may happen by on their lunch break. An old habit from another life. I don’t expect anyone to sit beside me. They never do. They don’t want to be bothered by an unwashed homeless woman. If people only knew how easily they could find themselves in my situation, they wouldn’t be so dismissive. All it took for me was one selfish desire and I lost everything.

Despite the cold day and the biting wind that’s picking up, children bundled in parkas skip from the slide to the swing and back. Red noses and wisps of blond hair peek from their hoods. If I squint my eyes, I can pretend Heather runs among the children, even though she didn’t have the energy to play with her friends the last time we came to the park. She only stood there, eyes glazed, her tiny body aching.

“What did the doctor say?” my friend Julia asked at the time, sitting beside me on the park bench. We taught together at the elementary school around the corner. She’d left her classroom as soon as I called and asked her to meet me. I’d taken the day off. Heather needed tests.

“Leukemia,” I said, and the tears I’d been restraining, hiding from Heather, fell loose. They rained down my cheek.

“Mia.” Julia grasped my hand. “I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. It’s aggressive.” I wiped my face with a gloved hand. The action

only smeared the moisture across my face.

Julia dug into her pocket. “Here. It’s clean.” She gave me a crumpled tissue.

“Thanks.” I dabbed my eyes, doing my best to compose myself before Heather looked our way. Garrett and I had to work with Heather’s team of doctors. We had to put a treatment plan into place, and we needed to work fast. There wasn’t time for me to lose my wits. I had to pull myself together.

I took a deep breath. Air shuttled into my lungs.

Julie watched me, compassion softening her mocha eyes. “It’s okay to cry.”

“I can’t.” I shook my head, wiping my nose. “There’s no time. God, Julia, they aren’t giving her much time.” My chest clenched on the last word. It came out as a whisper of air, carried away by the crisp winter wind.

“Mia.”

I startle at the sound of my name. The voice rips me from the past, lifting my gaze upward. I squint against the sun’s glare. Standing before me is a woman clad in a quilted coat that reaches her knees. She sits beside me, my gaze following. I blink at her.

“Hello, Mia.”

“Julia?” She hasn’t changed. Wavy black hair and round cheeks. She looks so clean and put together. Beautiful. I shy away, but she only smiles.

“I was wondering if you’d show up.”

“How did you know?” I didn’t know I’d be here until a short bit ago. The park was suddenly here, along with a rush of memories. Overwhelmed, I had to sit down.

“I didn’t. But it is February ninth.”

The day Heather died.

I stare, dumbfounded. “Has it been three years?”

Julia nods. “I waited for you last year, and the year before. You never showed.”

The pain of losing Heather, of losing everyone, had been too raw. The memories still make me ache. They steal my breath, leave me gasping.

Julia unfolds white butcher paper from a deli sandwich and offers me half. I take it greedily, starved for the taste of turkey, tomatoes, and provolone.

“I’ve seen you around town. I call out to you,” she says while I devour my first bite. I’d seen her, too, and I did what I always do whenever my path

crosses with someone from before. I walk away.

“When are you coming home, Mia?”

“I don’t have a home.”

Julia watches me eat. She doesn’t touch her half of the sandwich. I consume mine in large, unladylike bites. Lettuce hangs from the corner of my mouth. A smear of mustard decorates my upper lip. Her mouth turns down, and she looks away. I’m sure she’s repulsed, and I don’t care. My manners died when my dreams did.

“What about medical attention? Have you seen a doctor lately?”

“I don’t need a doctor.”

“It might help. Life outside can’t be healthy.”

“I get by. I’m still alive, aren’t I?”

“But you’re not living,” Julia objects, her frustration with me evident. “Stop running. You can’t hide from the pain forever. It always catches up. You need to talk to someone who can help you.”

“Like a shrink? No way.”

“Then find someone else.”

“No.” I give my head a hard shake.

“Live with me then. I have an extra room. I’m sure the school would offer you back your old position. Your students miss you. So do I.”

“No, you don’t.” No one misses me. I don’t deserve to be missed.

I abruptly stand. Stopping at the park was a bad decision. Too many painful memories. Tears thicken my throat, and I sob. “No one needs me.” Not anymore.

I walk away.

“Don’t leave.” Julia starts after me. I pick up my pace. Jogging from the park, head bent into the wind, I don’t look back. I never do.

Crossing the street, I wander, aimlessly, through the neighborhoods. My boots shuffle on pavement, and the declining temperature seeps into my bones. I bundle my coat tighter, shivering. The sun dips, and blue sky darkens to lavender. I pass a lingerie store, and two women, unbalanced on their stilettos, carrying an abundance of shopping bags, stumble out of the store. They bump into me, knocking me to the ground. I land hard on my rear, my wrist taking the brunt of the impact. I whimper, cradling my arm to my chest

like a wounded animal.

Leaving me in a piled heap on the concrete, the women teeter like giraffes to the curb and hail a cab. The yellow taxi immediately pulls to the curb, and one of the women, the tall, willowy blonde, glances back at me. Our gazes lock and I'm launched back in time. I see myself in the woman, dressed in designer clothes in a rush to get home to share my purchases with my husband. One of Garrett's favorite pastimes was having me model for him.

I recall such a time early in our marriage. He sat on the edge of the bed, gaze upon me, eyes heavy with lust. He spun his finger in the air. Obliging, and with a sultry grin, I slowly turned around, showing off the burgundy wine cheekies. Before I could complete the circle, he came up behind me, pressing his hard length against my backside. His arms circled my waist, and his fingers dipped below the hem of my silk panties, searching. A delicious tightening coiled at the juncture of my thighs, and my head fell back on his shoulder. I moaned, caving in to the feelings he stoked deep inside me.

The new lingerie didn't last long on me. It never did. Garrett had the bra unlatched and panties pushed down my thighs before I could gasp his name.

"You drive me mad when you dress like this for me," he rasped, nipping my ear. He spun me around and kissed me, hard and deep. We fell onto the bed, where he went to work on my body like a man possessed. A man in love. And afterward, spent and gloriously languid, we talked into the night, whispering of our love for one another and devising plans. We had such grand plans.

But the memory of us lying together morphs into another, more recent memory spent wrapped around each other, crying.

"We're draining our accounts," I said through tears. "I wish I never wanted this house. I wish we never saw the listing. If only we'd known about Heather before we bought the house."

"Shush, it'll be fine," Garrett rasped, thumbing the wetness from his eyes. "We'll second mortgage the house if we need to. I'll get another job. Some of the bills can lapse. Trust me, baby. We'll make it work."

He pressed his lips to my forehead and I held on to him, tight. I hold on to the memory of him just as tightly. I don't want to return to the present, but here I am, back on the pavement with the dirty, rank city surrounding me.

Slowly, cautiously, I stand, and the tall, willowy blonde rushes to my side.

“I’m sorry. My friend and I didn’t see you. Are you hurt?”

“No,” I snap the lie, cradling my injured wrist. It throbs.

The woman opens her clutch purse and withdraws a five. She waves the cash at me. “Take this. But promise you won’t spend it on booze.”

I stare at Abe Lincoln’s profile, and my fingers tingle. *Grab it*, the voice in my head urges.

I make a fist. I’ve been accepting handouts all day. Help I don’t deserve.

“I don’t drink.” I push her hand away and walk off.

“Fuck you, lady,” the woman yells. I don’t have to look back to know she’s flipping me off.

Time slips away. The sky darkens, and late afternoon blends into evening. Strands of twinkle lights wink on, flickering in the night. They spiral up tree trunks and into the branches, casting the glow of hundreds of fireflies. Storefronts brighten and light pours out windows, dripping yellows and golds onto the dirty snow that’s been shoveled into corners. At night the city is a fairy tale, hiding the filth that lurks in the shadows.

I keep up a steady pace, pausing to peek inside trash cans or to pick up a half-eaten apple someone tossed aside.

Voices whisper and thick-soled shoes shuffle behind me. I hear giggles and dares and the slosh of liquid in a bottle. Whoever is behind me has been following me for several blocks. I don’t glance over my shoulder. I don’t give them the satisfaction that I know they’re there. *Move along, you old hag*, they’ll tell me. They always do. I am nothing to them.

As I make my way toward the back alley of a restaurant where I know the kitchen staff leaves a basket of spoiled fruit and vegetables, I come upon a wine bar and stop abruptly to hover by the window. I can’t remember the last time I had a glass of wine, but at the table on the other side of the paned glass sits a solitary woman, her red wine a stark contrast to the table’s pristine white linen. I catch the woman’s expression and it lures me in. Despair weighs down the corners of her mouth and bows her shoulders. She fists a soiled tissue and averts her face when the waiter passes her table. Our gazes lock, and a flood of memories pour into me. They push the breath from my lungs. I’ve been this woman, my face awash with grief, sitting alone at a table across an empty

chair.

But I wasn't alone in a wine bar. I was home, sitting at the kitchen table, my untouched coffee cooling on the wood surface. I should have been on my way to the hospital to be with Heather, but I couldn't find the will to move. I couldn't take my eyes off Garrett's empty chair. He'd taken on an extra job so I wouldn't worry about our diminishing finances from treating Heather. He worked himself to exhaustion, and he'd fallen asleep behind the wheel. He didn't suffer, the police officer had told me, after they found Garrett's car wrapped around a tree. It had been quick. Instant. A life snuffed in the blink of an eye.

A sharp knock on the glass reels me back from the past, along with my grief and suffering. The emotions are oppressive and overwhelming. Life-sucking. I stumble backward under the weight, gasping. The woman on the other side of the window is talking to me. I watch her mouth form the words. *Are you okay?*

I want to scream, *No, I'm not. Garrett is gone. My brave, adoring husband is gone.*

A sob rips from my lungs, and I sprint awkwardly to the corner. My legs complain, unused to sudden bursts of activity. I stop at the light and catch my breath. My lungs rattle on the inhale, and another sob escapes. A bubble of air that leaves my throat raw. Tears fall unhindered, drenching my cheeks. The light changes and I run across the street. I run as fast as I can, away from the grief and sorrow. Away from my life.

But there's no escape. My misery keeps pace with me.

So does whoever has been following me.

I stop and bend over, hands on my knees. My chest heaves from the exertion, and I sneak a peek over my shoulder. Three young men in their late teens, judging by their grunge attire, tattoos, and piercings. They point at me with their paper-bag-wrapped bottles and laugh, mocking the way I ran, arms flailing and legs kicking out.

Tears continue to well, clouding my vision, like they did that time I drove home from the hospital after Heather's death. With my vision blurred, it would have been so easy to let my car drift off the side of the road. Garrett was gone. Heather was gone. I had no one left. Nobody needed me. There was no one left to love me.

But I couldn't do it. I couldn't swerve the wheel and throw my car into the ravine. Instead, I drove home, to a house that had once been filled with love and laughter. In their place, I found a mailbox full of bills, a voice mail box stuffed with collection calls, and a notice of impending foreclosure taped to the front door. The burden of it all broke me. I snapped and walked away. I walked away from it all.

Something hits me hard from behind and I go flying. My chin hits the pavement, jarring me back to the present. Dazed, I feel someone grab fistfuls of my coat and hair. Scorching pain rips across my scalp, and I shriek. Hands drag me into a darkened alley. They flip me over. Dizzy, I see three heads spinning above me. I can't make out faces, but I know it's the three teens who've been following me. They snicker and jeer. A shoe connects with my ribs and I grunt. A fist knocks my cheek, and a fireball of pain rattles my teeth and blazes down my spine. Hands tear at my clothes. Fingers bruise my skin.

I don't move. I don't try to fight them off. I stare blankly at the sky and let them have me. This is the way I deserve to go, the punishment and suffering so much greater than freezing to death on a cardboard mattress ever could be.

One of my assailants rips open my shirt and roughly grapples my breasts. I shirk away at the unexpected pain, and a switch flips. Survival mode clicks on. I kick and thrash. It only excites them. They punch me again and kick my shoulder. I cry out in pain, and a warmth spreads across my backside.

One man holds my wrists above me. Another tugs at my pants. "Dude, she reeks."

The third kneels between my legs. I hear a belt buckle unclick, a zipper pulled down.

"Do it quick then let's get out of here."

A hand dives down my pants only to immediately withdraw. He swears. "She's pissed herself."

"Fuck this. I ain't doing her." The biting grip around my wrists disappears, freeing my hands.

"Bitch." A boot connects with my stomach. I roll to my side, curling into myself, and retch. I brace for the next kick, waiting for them to finish me off, but it never comes. They've left. I'm alone.

Lying in a pool of my own blood and urine, I'm too weak to move, too

stunned to crawl to safety or call for help.

*You don't deserve help*, that nasty voice in my head shouts.

I don't get up, and I don't bother to cover myself.

I. Am. Done.

Minutes pass and the cold sets in. My body shakes uncontrollably. Darkness narrows my vision, and my mind drifts to more pleasant days. I think of Garrett's smile and Heather's laughter. I feel warm again. Peaceful.

"Mia."

My name is a whisper in the night.

I moan. "Go away."

"Mia."

Again, my name. Spoken with more force.

That voice.

I peel open my eyes. A man kneels over me. He smiles and my heart stutters.

"Garrett?"

"Hello, darling."

"How?" I close my eyes, not believing, but when I look back up, he's still there, still as handsome as ever. "Are you really here?"

"I never left you."

My eyes burn with tears. I cry, deep, heaving sobs. "I missed you. I've missed you so much." I want to touch him, but a monstrous weight sits on my arm. My body aches everywhere. I can't move. I feel cold, so cold.

"I'm sorry about the house," I wail. "I never, ever should have asked you to buy me the house."

"Shush," Garrett soothes. He cups my face, his fingers featherlight on my cheeks. Compassion warms his gaze, making his stormy gray eyes look like liquid silver. "You're better than this, Mia. You deserve a better life."

*No, I don't.*

I cry, deep, gut-wracking sobs, and squeeze my eyes shut. "No, no, no." I shake my head. But I can't shake out the memory that intrudes.

Before Garrett took on extra work in our attempt to save Heather, before our beautiful daughter was diagnosed with a disease that took her from me too soon, and before we bought the grand house I desperately desired and we couldn't afford, I had wanted to audition for the role of Fantine in our

regional theater's production of *Les Misérables*. It wasn't Broadway, or even off-Broadway. But it was a start, and I had dreams.

I was nervous. I had doubts about my abilities.

"I believe in you," Garrett had told me when I shared my fears with him. "You need to believe in yourself. You're the strongest, most talented woman I know, and I'm the lucky bastard who gets to have you as my wife. That theater troupe would be crazy not to cast you. You never cease to amaze me, Mia. You've achieved everything you put your heart and soul into. Auditioning won't be any different. The role is yours for the taking. The world is yours. Go get it."

I did, and I landed the role, only to step down toward the end of the show's run. Heather got sick, and I needed to care for her.

Another sob escapes, bouncing off the sides of the brick buildings that towered above. I miss my little girl. I want to ask Garrett if he's seen her, but he's talking to me. It's an order, demanding and insistent.

"Open your eyes."

I do, and my vision sharpens. Across the street, a sign glows. St. Margaret's Women's Shelter. My fingernails scratch at the damp pavement under me. I stare, incredulous. I'd been walking toward the shelter all along.

I glance quickly to ask Garrett if he guided me here, but he's gone.

"Garrett," I whisper with despair.

St. Margaret's sign glows, beckoning me to get up, to come inside, to fulfill the promise I'd made Sal this morning.

"I'd rather die," I wail into the night. Heather's waiting for me on the other side. Garrett's there, too. "Just let me die."

But dying's the easy way out.

*You're better than this, Mia. You deserve a better life.*

"I'm such a disappointment, Garrett."

He wouldn't have wanted this life for me. The old Mia never would have tolerated a life on the streets.

What have I done?

*Get up.*

I deserve better than this.

"Get up."

The words punch the air. But it's not Garrett's voice. It's my own.

"Get. Up!" I shout the order.

Using my last ounce of strength, I rise to my feet and straighten my clothes the best I can. Wrapping my coat around my malnourished frame, I make my way across the street, the sign to the women's shelter a beacon to a better life. The world is mine for the taking.

I reach the entrance and, hearing a noise, I stop and listen. A phone rings, the sound shrill. It's coming from inside the shelter. It rings again and again, piercing the air. It's calling to me. Gripping the handle, I take a deep breath and open the door.

# THE SPY

## ARIEL LAWHON

**T**HIS CONVERSATION IS BEING RECORDED. I know that, of course. I've been in Steve Cummings' office more times than I can count over the last fifteen years. But if I am lucky—no, luck has nothing to do with this, it never has—if I am *smart*, this will be my final debriefing. There are microphones hidden throughout the small, carpeted office. Cameras tucked into corners and air-conditioning vents. A button, somewhere beneath the lip of Cummings' desk, that, with a single tap, will begin the recording process. I don't bother searching for any of this, however. It doesn't matter. None of it can be disabled.

Steve closes his laptop and looks at me with his small, mean eyes. They're bloodshot and puffy. He needs to shave. I find this perversely satisfying. It's been a long day for him, too.

"Start again," he says, "from the beginning."

"I've been over this four times already."

"Not with me."

That is, *technically*, the truth. Cummings oversaw my first statement, at 7:30 this morning, when I walked in and resigned. But the others were recorded by various agents in the fourteen hours since. I haven't left the building. I

haven't eaten. I have simply been shuffled from one interrogation room to the next, giving the same statement over and over, waiting for my fellow operatives to direct the conversation back to its inevitable end: the Katawala incident.

First Steve sent me to Wilson, a tiny little man-boy the Agency recruited from a jockey club in Liverpool two decades ago. Rumor has it he was once the personal jockey to the queen of England. My employers find that connection useful. He didn't get anything out of me. Then came Paul—that was a low blow, we've been friends ever since I field-trained him eight years ago. Paul remained stoic and ruthless during the entire three hours. It was a bizarre form of gratification to realize my instincts have been right about him all along. He's a stellar agent.

I got a bathroom break before being subjected to Beulah Patterson, that woolly-haired mammoth of a woman they keep on hand for tough cases. Her interview was the hardest. If I let anything slip, it would have been during my time with Beulah. And I'm just paranoid enough to believe that's why I've been sent back to Cummings' office.

"It isn't difficult," I say. "I want out."

"Why?"

I settle deeper into the faded leather armchair across from Steve's desk and meet his hostile gaze. He's a pale man, bloated with self-importance. "Like I said this morning, I'm forty years old, my biological clock is ticking like a metronome, and this job isn't conducive to having a kid."

He gives me that look, the one that says I'm full of shit and he doesn't have a shovel. I think he might be ready to press that claim but then he changes tactics. Goes for the jugular. "Skip the preamble, Mia. Get right to Katawala. That's why we're here."

"I thought we were here to conduct my exit interview?"

"I've met a lot of stupid women in my life, but you're not one of them. Don't start pretending now. We're here because there remain a number of unanswered questions regarding the timing of your resignation and your meeting with Miles Katawala."

"Meaning...*what*...exactly?"

"You two really hit it off on the plane."

I lean forward, elbows pressing into my knees. The fine linen weave of my slacks digs into my skin, and I focus on this, using the discomfort like a grounding rod, a way to channel my emotions. Steve Cummings is trying to provoke me, and I must give him a glimpse of the anger and exhaustion he expects. So I pull myself back into the chair and press the heels of my hands into my eyes in a show of fatigue, then drag my fingers down my cheeks. I groan.

“That’s my *job*, Steve. That’s what you pay me to do. To hit it off with total strangers.”

“I pay you to get information.”

“Which I did. And I’ve given that statement about Katawala four times today. And once back in February. How many more times do you need it?”

He lifts a pen from his desk, spins it in his fingers. “You want out of here, Mia? You want to go home to your empty apartment and eat dinner out of a box while you flip through that sperm donor catalog?”

“Oh yeah, Steve. You know me. I’ve got the turkey baster all picked out.”

He snorts, some bastard noise born of humor and contempt. “Tell me about Katawala. *Again.*”

Every Steve I’ve ever known has been a dick. You’ve met one, you’ve met them all. A smorgasbord of douchebanoes. They are arrogant and inconsiderate. Dismissive. Ambitious. Pushy. Insulting. This one in particular is also a master of diversion and disdain, of making you feel stupid for answering the question he just asked. And he’s trying to get under my skin so I’ll slip up and contradict something I said earlier. The problem is, he knows what he’s looking for, and I don’t.

So I ignore the heat in my face and the frantic ticking of my pulse. I squelch my rage and do the thing I’m trained to do. I begin the process of comprehensive recall. Giving a statement is as much physical as it is mental, so I get in position. Legs crossed at the knees. Eyes closed. Palms spread on the armrests. The pads of each finger pressed against the grain of the leather. Chin tipped toward the ceiling. I drop my voice half an octave and steady the tone into something soothing and melodic, the way you’d sound reading to a child. And then I tug at the memory, like pulling a loose thread on an old sweater. Only the sweater is attached to a moving object, and I hold the thread as it

retreats. I watch the memory unspool and stretch taut before me. Then I follow the line.

“I made contact with Miles Katawala as directed, on February fifth of this year, during Lufthansa trans-Atlantic flight 1194. Frankfurt to Chicago. It was an Airbus A380. Business class. Row Ten. Center seats E and F. German pilots. Swiss flight attendants. It was the red-eye, so the flight was only three quarters full.” I can see each of these details in my mind, like woolen strands, bright with color. I open my mouth to continue as I have each time I’ve given this statement, but Steve interrupts.

His voice is impatient and grating. “Did you strike up a conversation with him immediately?”

He knows the answer to this question already. I shake my head and keep my eyes closed, trying to focus on the thread. “Nothing more than pleasantries while we got settled and buckled in. *Hello. Where are you from. What brings you to Frankfurt. Total shit weather they’re having, right.* That sort of thing. It’s a long flight. People can be weird when they’re traveling. The jet lag does strange things. I take my time.”

“Approximately how long before you began?”

I swallow my sigh. His questions are purposefully distracting, a way to throw me off balance so he can detect any rehearsed lies or omissions. “Thirty thousand feet. Once the drink service began.”

“And he was receptive to your conversation?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think Miles Katawala was attracted to you?”

I do open my eyes at this. “How would I know?”

“It’s your job.”

“No,” I snap—just enough to seem authentic but remain professional. “My job is to have very specific conversations with very specific people. Not read minds.”

“Did he *appear* attracted to you?”

“He *appeared* tired. And distracted, but he warmed up to the conversation soon enough. However, if you are asking whether he flirted with me or I with him, the answer is no. We were two strangers on a plane killing time during a long flight.”

Cummings swats away my defensiveness. “Continue.”

I wait for a moment to see if he will interrupt again, and then I close my eyes again and recite the entire conversation I had with Miles Katawala, from memory. How I took my glass from the flight attendant and, with a shrug, tipped it toward him and said, “Cheers.” From there we moved to introductions. He gave his real name, I did not. Anne Barrows, from Chicago, an ER trauma nurse, was my cover for that trip. We discussed our reasons for visiting Germany. Me: vacation. Him: work. *Oh really, what do you do? Pharmaceutical sales.* He went into the family business. His parents were both chemists specializing in research of infectious diseases, but he preferred sales to science so he put on a suit instead of a lab coat. His drug company had just been bought out by a European conglomerate. He was there to meet the new bosses but he wasn’t gonna lie, the German beer was a bonus. *Ugh. Beer. Can’t stand the stuff,* I’d said, *I’m a wine and booze girl, myself.* Then he gave me a mini-sermon on the virtues of the Deutschland breweries and made me promise that if I ever had the chance to taste a real, dark Augustiner Hell that I would. *Sounds like hell,* I’d said, and he’d laughed and we were off to the races from there. The conversation with Miles Katawala drifted in and out over the course of that ten-hour flight, stacked primarily at the beginning and end. He fell asleep for several hours in the middle—I did not.

This is my job. Why I’m here—not only in Cummings’ office, but at the Agency in general. It’s simple, really. I have conversations with total strangers, and then I repeat them, verbatim, to my handlers. Usually Steve, but occasionally some other high-level manager angling for the director’s chair. I never use a recording device, and I always—without exception—deliver my reports in person. No land lines and never, under any circumstances, a cell phone. In the fifteen years that I’ve had this job, three of my colleagues have gone missing, and in every case, they gave their last statement over the phone. I’m not supposed to know this, of course. Then again, there are lots of things I’m not supposed to know. Like perfect recall, it’s another talent I’ve developed.

I am a mnemonist. A human tape recorder. A chatty Kathy. The girl who talks you up in a bar, on the playground, in the TSA pre-check line, or in your dentist’s waiting room. I learn very specific things about your life: how

you cheated on your taxes, the layout of your office, the details of your illicit affair, the employee you recruited from a shady Middle East country, your mother's *real* maiden name—not the fake one listed on your passport application. I am able to learn this information because you *want* to give it. It's a subconscious compulsion. The human psyche does not like secrets. They fester and boil inside of you until they can be extracted. Like a splinter or an ingrown hair, you're only too happy to be rid of them. Sometimes I draw them out of you in a few random moments, and sometimes it takes a ten-hour trans-Atlantic flight. The flotsam and jetsam of your life, the very specific details I've been instructed to glean, are quite valuable to my employers. When we part ways, you will never see me again. Most of the time you won't even remember me. I'm just that girl who stubbed her toe in the locker room and made you laugh with her creative expletives. You'll only recall that I'm pretty, but not exceptionally so. Quite tall. Blue eyes. Unnaturally straight teeth. I aim to be pleasant but forgettable. Even that is purposeful. Men are distracted by beauty, and women are distrustful. There's a balance in the middle that I strive for. I need you to talk but not realize that you have.

It's what I do with that information after we chat that makes my job a spectacular form of deceit. I deliver it to this very building, right to the greedy ears of Steve Cummings. And the file on you—the one you don't even know exists—grows by a dozen pages, the information to be studied and brooded over until an opportune moment arises.

Overall, it takes me just under two hours to relay my conversation with Miles Katawala to Steve Cummings. By the time I'm done, my voice is raspy and my mouth is dry. I pull in my cheeks, trying to draw moisture from the salivary glands that line my mouth. It's a tell that will be noted by whoever is watching this video feed. There's a water bottle on the end table beside my chair, but I don't even give it a single longing glance. I did not bring it into the room, therefore it is not safe.

"I have questions," Steve says.

I am exhausted. My bones feel heavy. I need to pee, again, and I could murder someone for a greasy burger, a plate of fries, and a glass of red wine. "Okay."

"Start with his vitals."

“That’s not a question.”

Oh, look at that. Now it’s Cummings’ turn to be angry. His upper lip twitches and his neck is splotchy. “What *exactly* did you learn about Katawala’s family history?” he asks, voice punctuated by irritation.

“Miles Katawala.” I clear my throat and continue. “Forty-five years old. Of dual American and Indian descent. His father was from Mumbai and his mother from Omaha.”

They will compare this tape to the ones recorded elsewhere today, so he has to be thorough. “Was?” he asks.

“They are both deceased.” I pull the thread from the tidy folds of my mind—that unique hard drive built from natural memory and carefully honed artificial recollection. “Five months ago. House fire. They met at a Dartmouth frat party in 1973, a year after the college became co-ed—”

“Cause?”

I am careful to clarify. I will not give Steve Cummings one detail more than he’s asking for. “Of their meeting?”

“Of the fire.”

“Katawala said it was electrical.” His exact words were: *Bastards that remodeled my parents’ kitchen hired some electrician—a fucking Irish Traveler—that was high as a kite. The whole damn house was a fire hazard after that.* I watch Cummings for a moment, waiting to see if he has any more questions about the fire before I continue. “—he was born nine months later.”

Steve loosens his tie and rolls his neck, tired. “Must have been some party.”

I shrug, noncommittal, and wait.

“Dev and Elizabeth Katawala were valuable assets. As a result, the Agency was set back ten years on our operation in West Africa.”

Africa, not India. Interesting. I add this little fact to the mental file I have built on Steve Cummings. I blink at him in mock surprise. “His parents were assets?”

“Among other things.”

“I thought they were scientists.”

“Katawala tell you that?”

Another neatly laid trap. “Yes,” I reply without elaboration.

About halfway across the Atlantic, when the flight attendants turned out the

cabin lights and the passengers settled in for what little sleep they could get, Miles told me his parents worked for the CDC developing vaccines for rare diseases. That they were weeks away from finalizing a cure for Ebola when their house in Atlanta's historic Inman Park neighborhood burned to the ground in the middle of the night. He told me that they were found together in bed, bodies charred but still holding hands. In that jet-lagged, sleep-deprived, mid-flight state, his light-brown eyes hooded with exhaustion, eyelashes sweeping across those high cheekbones, and his voice soft with wine and looming sleep, Miles had wondered why they didn't wake up, why they didn't cough and scramble out of bed. Jump out a window. *How could anyone sleep through that?* Then he looked right at me and asked if I thought they could have been drugged beforehand. *Why would someone drug them?* I'd asked in return. *Because they worked for the CIA* was his response.

And I've been thinking about that ever since.

Cummings sent me to Frankfurt with a file on Katawala and a single goal: Find out what he knew about his parents' death. It's funny how some things stick in your craw. How you can have hundreds of conversations over the course of a long career and one little comment derails everything. Two renowned biotech engineers working for the CDC, weeks away from a groundbreaking Ebola vaccine, die in a house fire, and their son believes they were murdered. What happens to the son if I include that in my report? What happens to the son if he picks up his suitcase at baggage claim and catches a cab back to his Lincoln Park row house? Do I wake up three weeks later, turn on the news, and see that some middle-aged pharmaceutical sales manager from Chicago has thrown himself off a bridge? Those are the sorts of questions that keep a girl from sleeping at thirty thousand feet.

"When, exactly, during that flight did you and Katawala discuss the fire?" Cummings asks.

"About halfway through, two-thirty in the morning."

"Was he sober?"

I look at him, at the pinched look around his mouth, at those thin lips. He is balding poorly and going gray in patches, like a Dalmatian. But mostly I'm intrigued by this new question. "He wasn't drunk."

"But he'd been drinking?"

“Pinot Noir. Three glasses spread over five hours, one with dinner. So he was definitely relaxed and very sleepy, but not wasted.” He was also charming and funny, prone to irreverence, and laughed easily. There is no aphrodisiac in all the world like a man with a great laugh.

“And you?”

Another new question. “I never drink while working.”

It’s Steve’s turn to be surprised. “How do you get around it?”

I find his curiosity alarming. These are tricks of the trade. I never pass them out unless asked directly in a debriefing. It’s one of the few instances where truth is the better option. Damn. I have grown to hate giving Steve Cummings anything to put in my file.

“It’s not hard. Bartenders. Waiters. Flight attendants. It’s their job to linger, to be available if you need them. So I find a moment to pull them aside and whisper, sheepishly, that I’m a recovering alcoholic and that I’m here to have a good time but I can’t drink. I tell them that I’ll order gin and tonic but I really just want soda water with lime. Keep it virgin, but don’t tell my friends. It’s embarrassing, this problem I have, but I’ve been sober now for six months and I don’t want to break the streak. They always bend over backward to accommodate.”

Cummings looks intrigued, and for a brief moment there’s a flash of something—respect or, perhaps, regret—in his eyes. I’m the best mnemonist he has, and he doesn’t want to lose me. Tough. He shouldn’t have put out the hit on Miles’ parents.

Like I said, I always know things I shouldn’t.

“At any point during that flight did Katawala mention the specific nature of his parents’ scientific research?”

“Only that they worked for the CDC in Atlanta. That his father loved the southern heat, but his mother hated it. She wanted to retire. He didn’t.”

Cummings leans back in his desk chair and steeples his fingers. It’s dark outside now and the streetlights are popping on, one by one, across the city, little pinpricks of light on the other side of his single, narrow office window. My stomach growls even though my waistband feels tight. It’s a strange sensation. I stifle a yawn. Wonder what I look like on those hidden cameras. Like hell, no doubt. As though I’ve wilted. Limp hair and dark circles under

my eyes.

“We have reason to believe that the Katawalas gave their son a digital file containing all of the research they conducted for the CDC. It is imperative that the Agency finds him and takes possession of that research. Under no circumstances can that research fall into the hands of his employer.”

I shake my head, seemingly confused, and make a note of that last sentence. The ability to control a disease—its spread and its cure—is a valuable commodity, to my employers and to an entire drug industry. But that is not a line of questioning I am willing to pursue on tape, so I turn the conversation in a safer direction.

“What do you mean, it’s imperative that the Agency *finds* him?” I ask.

There is a single, sharp knock on Cummings’ office door. He tips his head to the side and squints at me. “Miles Katawala deplaned in Chicago, and no one has seen or heard from him since.”

Two knocks this time. Harder. More insistent. I force myself not to look at the door, uneasy at the idea of being surrounded.

Cummings pushes back from his desk and steps around my chair so he can open the office door behind me. He sticks his head into the hallway. “What?”

I resist the instinct to stand or angle my body into a safer position. Reminding myself that I am on camera, that someone, somewhere in the bowels of this building, is watching me, taking notes, I try to appear disinterested. I glance casually around the room, waiting. I look at the dusty ficus tree, the landline with its twisted cord lying at a haphazard angle on Cummings’ desk. The window blind. And I listen as Steve Cummings steps into the hall and pulls the door tight, but not all the way closed. Entry to his office requires a key card, and that is sitting on his desk beside his phone. The voices on the other side of the door are hushed whispers. Masculine. I know that a question has been asked because Steve says, “Not yet,” as he pushes the door open and steps back into the office. He returns to his seat. Taps the Katawala file on his desk with a pen. Avoids my gaze for a good ten seconds.

“Where is Miles Katawala?” he asks bluntly.

“I don’t know.” This, like half of what I’ve said on record today, is a lie. That’s the thing about this job, over time you get really, *really* good at lying. You start out doing it for sport, just to see if you can get away with it. Then it

becomes a matter of survival.

“Security footage from Chicago O’Hare International Airport on the day of your arrival shows Katawala exiting the plane, stopping by the men’s restroom, then heading toward baggage claim. But he never got there. His luggage was never collected, and he is not seen on any camera leaving the airport.”

I shake my head. “How is that possible?”

“We were hoping you could answer that.”

“I can’t.”

“Can’t? Or won’t?”

I ignore the implication and ask, “Did he change in the bathroom? Put on a hat? He had a small carry-on.” I press my eyes shut, searching for that thread among all the others. “A messenger bag. Black leather. Kenneth Cole. I never got a look inside, but it was big enough to hold a complete change of clothes.”

“No. He exited the bathroom in the same clothes.”

“So, what happened?”

Steve shrugs. It’s a helpless motion that doesn’t suit him. “He got on the people carrier and rode it for fifty yards. Then he stepped off and entered a crowd of people headed toward baggage claim. By the time they moved into the next field of vision he was gone.”

“He didn’t backtrack?”

“No. He’s not seen again on film, after that. Or anywhere else, for that matter. Your flight arrived at O’Hare on Sunday morning, and he never showed up for work on Monday.”

“What about his landlord? Neighbors?”

“Doesn’t have a landlord. He paid cash for his row house six years ago. He might have been back to his house. We can’t say for sure. It was eight degrees in Chicago on February fifth. All the neighbors said they stayed in and tried to keep warm. No one saw him. And we didn’t start looking for him until his boss at Meyer Pharmaceutical reported him missing.”

This isn’t uncommon. Katawala is not the first Client to go missing after one of our chats. I do my part, and then I walk away. Sometimes, weeks or months, even years later I read about a disappearance in the newspaper. I

remember the face. I try to stifle any sense of guilt. It's the unspoken reality of my job. Yet, in all the years I've been doing this, Steve Cummings has never mentioned it afterward.

"And you think what...that I had something to do with it? That I killed him? Dismembered him in the family bathroom at O'Hare and flushed all the bits down the toilet?"

"No," he says. "I think you helped him."

I slump back into my chair. Cross my arms. "Oh, for God's sake. *Really?* That's why you've had me here for sixteen hours? Why you won't let me go home?"

"It's the only logical explanation."

"You guys lose a Client, in the airport of all places, and it's *my* fault? *I've* turned somehow? Are you serious?"

"Katawala had no reason to run unless he was tipped off."

Sometimes it's just a breath—the difference between winning or losing, keeping your secrets or revealing them, living or dying—a mere split-second decision that could go either way. You see the trap, or you fall into it. You blurt out something you shouldn't know, that maybe Katawala ran because his parents were murdered. Or you slow it down, sidestep the retort, pull your shit together, sit calmly in your damn chair, and look at your boss like you pity him for grasping at straws.

"You've studied the footage," I say.

"At length."

"Then you've seen that, after Katawala deplaned, I did the same. That I went directly to my connecting flight and flew to Dulles."

"The footage shows that, yes."

"Then you know I had nothing to do with it." A pause, and then, "But I am curious about something."

At length, he asks, "What?"

"Why does it matter? Katawala. The fire. His parents. Their research. What he did or didn't know?"

Steve Cummings looks at me with an expression that can only be described as disappointment. I have failed him. I can see the realization there on his face. I don't have what he wants. This has been a waste of time. He is wrong.

“That is need-to-know information, Mia. And you don’t work for the Agency anymore,” he says, then tosses the pen onto his desk.

Something about that small, frustrated movement gives me the confidence I need to stand. “Thank you,” I tell Steve Cummings as I lift my purse from the table beside my chair. I sling the strap over my shoulder.

“For what?”

“Accepting my resignation,” I say.

He meets me in front of his desk, and I think for a moment that he will offer his hand, subject me to the obligatory farewell shake. But instead he reaches for the doorknob and says, “Allow me.”

As I move into the hallway, I am almost hopeful that I will, in fact, make it out of this building. And that is when the phone on Steve Cummings’ desk rings.

He pauses for a half step and looks over his shoulder. I ignore him. Ignore the phone. I glance toward the bank of elevators at the end of the hallway.

A second ring.

I step to the side, careful not to turn my back on him just yet.

A third ring.

Steve Cummings gives me a curt nod. “Mia,” he says, with finality, and then he goes to answer the phone.

It’s hard not to run. I have timed this before. I know that it takes exactly five minutes and twenty-three seconds to get from Cummings’ office to my Jeep in the parking lot. Two hundred and eighty steps at a normal pace. Five floors. Three hallways. One elevator. The lobby. A short set of steps out front. The sidewalk. A long stretch of asphalt. All of it monitored by closed-circuit cameras. And just as there is an art to listening and lying, there is an art to making a clean exit.

Don’t look at your phone. Don’t pick your nails. Don’t hold your breath.

Do acknowledge anyone you meet with a polite nod or a simple greeting. Do smile at the security guards. Do give the star embedded in the middle of the marbled lobby one last, wistful glance before walking out of the building for good.

From the outside the building looks like most of the others in Langley: Unmarked and uninteresting. Numbered instead of named. Solid and square.

Red bricks and bulletproof glass. I breathe. Search for my keys in the bottom of my purse. Cross the parking lot. Let myself believe for the first time in weeks that I will see Miles again. That he's waiting right where I left him. I fantasize about that burger and fries as I cross the parking lot. The wine is off limits until I've pissed on a stick, however. I couldn't run the risk of knowing, for sure, in the off chance that Cummings would subject me to a polygraph test.

My Jeep is the realization of a teenage fantasy. Impractical. But it makes me feel young and fun. I like the roll bar and the way it rumbles when I take corners a little too fast. When I climb inside, it smells of warm leather and air freshener. I take my old, outdated iPhone out of my purse and set it in the console. My fingers itch to put it in airplane mode, but I force myself to wait.

It's amazing, the things you learn over the course of a fifteen-year career in espionage. The conversations you have, many of them in airports, during interminable layovers, with pilots and flight attendants, fellow travelers, TSA agents, gate crew, maintenance men, and air marshals (they're easy to spot if you know what you're looking for). People are always bored in airports. They are *happy* to talk, and I am eager to collect tricks of the trade. Things that may come in handy one day. I have learned the specific steps by which a commercial passenger plane can be landed remotely. That all air traffic control officers are chain smokers. How to check a gun with ammunition so it arrives without incident at my final destination. That with older model iPhones, anything before iOS 10, airplane mode disables GPS.

And I have learned that there are service doors located discreetly in every US airport. An escape hatch for authorized personnel only. They are tucked between video surveillance cameras and are accessible only by a key card or an access code. These doors lead to a stairwell, followed by a short hallway and your choice of an exterior door that goes directly onto the tarmac or an elevator that will take you to the basement. I gave Miles Katawala that access code thirty minutes before we deplaned at O'Hare along with instructions to exit via the basement and wait at a safe house until I arrived. The man is very good at following instructions.

I start the engine. Put the car in drive. Roll toward the security gate. And my phone rings.

Steve Cummings' name flashes across the display. There are cameras throughout the parking lot. I can't not answer.

"Hello?" I stop beside the guard house and roll down my window. Smile politely. Hand him my badge.

Cummings' voice is smug on the other end. "How far along are you, Mia?"

I refuse to panic. I've got a fifty-fifty shot that he is taking one last, wild stab in the dark.

*"What?"*

"Did Katawala induct you into the mile-high club? Or did you seal the deal later, wherever it is you've hidden him?"

I'm holding the phone to my ear as the security guard looks at the laminated rectangle with my picture and then directly at me. Back and forth. Three times. My heart pounds in my chest. When he tries to hand my badge back, I shake my head. "Keep it. Today's my last day," I say, and then, to Cummings, with every bit of disgust I can force into my voice, "Good-bye, Steve."

I end the call, and the security guard lifts the red-and-white striped bar. I put my phone in airplane mode and drive away.

I don't look back.

# THE ACTRESS

## JOY JORDAN-LAKE

**M**Y MIND KEEPS SPIRALING AWAY—LOOPING and twisting and frantic—from whatever it is the perky young reporter is asking. I am trying to focus on the words she is forming, not because I give even one sliver of a damn about what she is saying but because my own thoughts have become a dark, dizzying blur.

I am straining to listen to her—truly I am—but all I can hear is the splat and hiss of the waves hitting the cliffs below us. It should be relaxing, this sound—tourists come from all over the world to admire the surf here, and the cliff-edged sweep of this bay. But today I can think only that it must hurt, those waves slamming so hard into rock.

Today it makes me think only of death.

Trying harder to focus, I lean forward and narrow my eyes on the reporter's too-eager face, her cheeks flushing the same fuchsia as the roses behind her—the roses that line the cliffs here at Laguna. But there my thoughts go again, swooping out to those roses and over the cliffs, down toward the rolling blue-green Pacific, and back to a range—*my* range—of rolling blue-green mountains back east.

My thoughts come now in time with the slap of the waves on the cliffs:

*I should be there.*

*I should be there right now.*

*They must have been lying before.*

*But now there's no choice.*

*Being here for today—for tonight—is what anyone would choose to do now.*

I lay my hand on my phone, facedown on the patio table, and the lines of the texts I know are there on the screen shoot pain through my chest so strong I think my lungs might shred. A deafening noise from behind launches me up to my feet, and for several seconds I am sure that sound was the explosion of me, my insides blown out.

Ignoring the other diners' whispers and stares—several more have recognized me—I look down to find, to my surprise, my body intact. I step from the patio toward the hub of the crash just inside the French doors of Las Brisas, where the tile is covered in shattered teal ceramic and glass.

A waitress' platter has fallen and she is in tears. A man in a tailored white shirt with his cell to his ear must have just barreled past, and he turns now to glance back. I know he must have jostled her arm—because my mother was in this profession, and one sees these things all the time. I also know he will say nothing, and neither will the waitress—because he won't and she can't.

Bending, I help pick up the shards. I know the rapid-fire clicks around us are cell phone cameras snapping pictures of a Hollywood celebrity's kindness.

Which is nonsense.

My scooping teal crockery shards off Mexican tile is only about this particular day and those texts on my screen. And about my mother and her off-season income and how waitresses don't get enough credit or enough tips to support the kids they are raising alone—all alone with no help from the men who knock them sideways or knock them up.

I nod to the waitress, whose mascara has smeared down to her chin, as she murmurs a string of *thankyouI'msoembarrassed*. And I seat myself quickly back on the patio across from the perky little reporter, who is looking at me now with adoring eyes. Which makes me glare out at the sea. This reporter does not know me, and she does not understand.

I catch bits of her preamble to me before she launches her questions, and all her well-rehearsed fawning is making me cringe—visibly, I hope.

“One of the finest actresses of your generation,” she begins, and I hope she’ll end there.

Because this much is objectively true. Tonight is proof of that. I don’t bother to argue coyly, or even thank her.

But she gushes on—and here’s where she goes wrong.

“One of the finest, perhaps *the* finest...*of all time.*”

My sunglasses might hide the roll of my eyes here—but if she sees my disgust, so much the better. Perhaps she’ll be shamed into silence. Because this last gurgle of hers betrays one of two things: pitiful ignorance or mindless flattery. Either way, it annoys me.

I restrain myself from shaking her skinny shoulders in their black wool blazer—or observing that only a writer, and especially one from Manhattan, would wear black wool at an outdoor café high on the hills of Laguna Beach. I do not bury her with the obvious landslide of names from film and stage: Dame Judi Dench or Helen Mirren or the Hepburns, Katharine and Audrey both, or Ingrid Bergman—or Meryl Streep, for God’s sake.

I am good at what I do, and I don’t pretend not to know this. But I’m not yet in their ranks, and to imply that I’ve done at forty what these women have done over their lifetimes shows a lack of respect for the depth that comes only with age.

Watching my mother has taught me this. There is a soul-stretching and breadth that comes with a life well lived and work well done. And there’s no shortcut to it, other than slogging with courage over the years.

The reporter is asking me something—and she looks confused. “Your... mother?”

“Sorry. Just thinking out loud.” I lift my Diet Coke in a gesture of penance.

I am trying not to hear the waves slamming themselves into the rock. I am trying not to keep thinking of death. Or who must have been lying to me.

The reporter is blinking at me from behind her tortoiseshell frames.

“Of course.” She is quick to excuse my rudeness—because she has little choice. “You must be beyond thrilled. About tonight, of course.”

Clearly, the young reporter is new and still starstruck—and no doubt tonight will be her first invitation to the Oscars. Actually, it’s also my first, despite earlier films that industry watchers insist should have gotten me there long

before. The Academy likes to punish those who commence a career in chick flicks.

But why, I wonder, is the *New York Times*' Arts & Leisure editor sending what looks like a college intern to do their film interviews now? I'm hardly ancient, but this young thing with a pen tucked behind one ear like Hepburn—Katharine, not Audrey—in *My Girl Friday* appears to be only just beyond pimples and Justin Bieber posters. And no one her age has even seen Hepburn in *Friday*.

This is better: I have shifted my attention to the reporter herself, not on the news that I've just received or the phone call I will have to make soon or the dark eddies of swirling fear, the downward suck and pull and spin in my head.

As distraction, I force myself to examine the reporter's small face: a fluff of brown frizzy bob framing unremarkable features. I do not point out that while I respect her lack of makeup as a kind of nonconforming independence, I could also observe that most women—most people in general—could do with a bit of help. And that a wand-flip of mascara and a little lip gloss never hurt anyone, including New York film critics.

"The intellectual tortoiseshell frames," I want to tell her, "are fooling no one, sugar." But we don't call people *sugar* here in Southern California, and I ought to try, at least, to trust she's as smart as the glasses would have me believe.

I dislike props that are meant to make me elevate someone's IQ before I've had a chance to judge for myself. And I despise being led to surmise something that is not the case.

Which slings my thoughts back to the texts on my screen. The phone call I need to make now.

"They let me believe what I wanted to hear," I observe—though I'd not meant to observe it out loud. "And *she* must have bald-faced lied to me."

"I don't...I'm sorry." The reporter is bewildered, thrown off what little stride she'd established. "Who...let you believe...?"

"Nothing." I shake my head. "Forgive me. I have a good deal on my mind just now."

Relieved, she brightens and reverts to gushing. "I can only *imagine!* On today of all days!"

If she says that again, I may have to smack her makeup-free little face. She has no idea the twist of a knife those five words are to me now.

*On today of all days.*

I speak the line now that needs saying, and not what I'd like to tell her: "You were about to ask me a question. Go ahead."

I can see that my tone must be sharp by the startled look in her eyes—eyes that do not stand out from her face.

I do not feel in the mood to use a friendlier tone, but this is where one's professional training comes in. I smooth my face into unobjectionably pleasant and give the people eavesdropping around us the voice they will Instagram about in a moment when they've managed to snap pictures from behind their margaritas: *OMG, Mia Jensen is even kinder in person than she is on the screen!*

"Please," I tell the reporter gently. "You were speaking and I interrupted. I apologize if I seem a bit distracted at the moment."

*I've had some life-upending news. Distracted does not even begin to cover what I am feeling,* I nearly add. But do not.

"Please do go on with the question you'd started," I say instead. And I add an *I'm-just-riveted* tilt of the head to finish it out.

"Well, Mia—may I call you Mia? I wanted to ask, Ms. Jensen—I mean *Mia*." She laughs at this too hard, and it's clear she does not drink often—at least not two glasses of wine back to back before nine in the morning, and never in full Laguna Beach sun. She will regret the second glass later when she looks at the tangled mess of her notes. "I wanted to ask if this is your actual name or a stage name. Mia Jensen just sounds so..." She blushes behind the glasses. "So elegantly *Hollywood*. So I...well, I just wondered, you know?"

"Mia Grace Jensen was my given name, yes." I tense here, but keep going. I know how to keep speaking as tension builds. "Given by my mother, the only parent I ever had in the picture. Though plenty enough parent. Plenty tough. And the most loving... It was like her arms stayed always ready for a wrap-around hug, no matter what I'd just..." My voice crumples in on itself here, and I pause. My voice rarely goes rogue on me. I steel myself. Sip my Diet Coke. "The Grace is after my mother. Grace Jensen."

Grace Jensen. Who lives alone in the mountains, hefting a platter of food over her head, despite my success.

“Great. And now, Mia, if I could follow that fairly practical question with a more, you know, existential one. Or maybe what I mean is more *theoretical*. Or more...”

“Yes?” I am not feeling gracious, but I act the part.

“Well, really, it’s sort of a ludicrous question for a woman such as yourself who’s already achieved what you have—and to ask it on this day of all days!”

I clench my teeth and manage to make my mouth turn slightly upward. I don’t dare to speak.

“But, Mia, I simply *have* to ask... Okay, here it is: Do you have any...” She pauses a beat for suspense, and I grip the edges of my chair for patience. “Any *regrets?*”

My head snaps back as if I’ve been struck. My placid expression has gone suddenly tight. My lips press hard together.

*Regrets.*

*And to ask it on this day of all days, she’d said.*

The reporter does not need to spell out for me—or for anyone eavesdropping nearby—what *this day* refers to.

The reporter would think, of course, that she knows what *this day* means to the household-name star Mia Jensen, whose basic story everyone knows.

Mia Jensen, who began her career straight out of high school productions of *Oklahoma!* and *Grease*, Mia’s own mother whipping out the last stitches—sometimes only hot-glued, since Grace Jensen really wasn’t much of a seamstress—on costumes backstage mere moments before the costumes went prancing past the school’s moth-eaten red velvet curtains.

Mia Jensen, whose own path to stardom was mostly glittered and smooth. From that first romantic comedy at eighteen, her name became synonymous with heartwarming, charmingly quirky love stories with just the right measure of conflict before the unfeasible but sweetly satisfactory happy ending.

And then Mia Jensen, observing that actresses over thirty-five no longer land chick flick roles except as the mentor shopkeeper, strategically began instructing her agent only to accept scripts that were substantive. Which led to Mia Jensen, Actress to Be Taken Seriously.

Which led, of course, to today: Mia Jensen, nominee for Best Actress—and the front-runner, *People* and *Variety* both have insisted, to win that category

tonight at the Academy Awards.

“Now, Mia, by *regrets*, I didn’t mean to pry. Or to imply that...”

Head snapping sharply away, I make myself draw a deep breath. The salt air of Laguna is always a comfort, scented as it is with these roses and the heather and sage that grow along the cliffs and the oil paints of local artists who set up their canvases along the shore and the fresh seafood of the cafés.

*And, let’s be honest, that most comforting scent of all: the smell of new money.*

*The leather seats of the sports cars. The mulch of the landscaping crews. The just-cut lumber of mansion renovation. The coconut oil of people with time to stroll in the sun.*

“Do you have any regrets?” the reporter is asking again now—trying hard not to look as impatient as she must surely feel. I give her credit for this.

I look her dead in the eye. “How many people do you think would regret owning an eight-bedroom house at Laguna Beach, a penthouse condo in Pasadena, closer to the Paramount lot, and having planned her whole life, everything she said *no* to, everything that she left behind, for getting to walk the red carpet tonight?”

The reporter thinks it’s a rhetorical question and she laughs, nodding in what she thinks is agreement.

But it was a real question. I am wanting to hear her real answer.

“You are forty,” she ventures. Then hastily adds, “Though, oh my God, you don’t look it *at all*.”

“I work at staying fit,” I tell her. And I let my eyes drift back to the ocean so hers can drop to my calves, which are the legs, she’ll be able to see, of a runner. Out of my peripheral vision, I see her jot this down in her notes.

“A commitment to fitness,” she murmurs as she scribbles. “Still naturally gorgeous at forty.”

The *naturally* isn’t entirely accurate. But I refuse to be coaxed into confessing the occasional injection or the infrequent nip or tuck. She is probably too young still to realize that no one looks this way at forty without a bit of surgical lift.

And *gorgeous* is a bit much—a throwaway flattery word. But I am nice looking for forty, it’s true—particularly now for a Serious Actress. This isn’t vanity on my part. It’s simply part of my job as a woman in this profession—to track and adjust my appearance, much as a novelist might monitor her

word count for the day or total her royalties for the year.

Besides, most of how I look has little to do with myself so much as what I inherited from genetics—my mother’s. Grace Jensen with her long, slender legs and neck, even at sixty. Grace Jensen with her statuesque frame and her thick waving hair...at least, until the treatments this year.

*Regrets.*

*On this day of all days*, the little meddler asked.

And here she sits squirming and thinking she’s upset the celebrity actress simply by prying on the morning of the Oscars.

She has no idea the real reason that this day would feel like *of all days* to me.

The reporter, her frizzy brown bob tossing as she glances toward the Pacific, would have no idea about the texts that slid onto my phone just before she arrived—the texts that upended my world.

“Regrets,” I say, letting the word sift out slow.

“I didn’t mean to...”

Lowering my sunglasses, I level a gaze at her and give her the most wan of smiles. “Isn’t that what you reporters do best? Pry? And imply things?”

The reporter flutters her pen at the pad, but jots down nothing. Then gulps at her Chardonnay.

*As if that will help at nine in the morning.*

They’ve sent a newbie this time, I decide now, likely because her daddy was the editor’s attorney or college roommate. And since I am quite likely to win Best Actress, I will be hard to schedule an interview with for some weeks hereafter.

“Clever,” I comment aloud. Because I admire people who plan ahead. Something I’ve done all my life. And never looked back.

Never, that is, until—perhaps—today.

Today of all days.

I reach for my phone facedown on the table, but do not have to lift it to recall every word of the texts, beginning with:

**Mia, you’ll be shocked to hear from an old friend.**

An old friend.

No doubt he’d considered carefully just how to word that. Friendship was

not the word I would have used for the heat and the laughter and wildness and passion we had. The cyclone of emotion that was us.

But what other word could he have used, given who we are now—and on this of all days?

**It's Scott Sandlin, and I...I wish I were contacting you for a happier reason.**

The sight of his name alone, only that, after all these years would have unmoored me enough. But then came more:

**Found your number on your mother's phone since she wouldn't hear of calling you herself. This is your night, she says.**

**MY GOD she's fierce in protecting that.**

Yes. That would be Grace.

And then another text had slid onto my screen.

**But I think the Mia that I remember would want to know.**

*The Mia that I remember...*

Now there was a loaded phrase. Implying that only the old—and presumably more compassionate—Mia would want to know.

And then the lines that exploded inside me.

**They say now we may be down to days, or even hours.**

I was still feeling my insides blow all apart when the black wool blazer-clad young woman approached, pen behind one ear, across the Las Brisas patio. She'd been just sitting down when another text dinged.

**Call me anytime.**

And then, as if Scott Sandlin had feared that last could be read in light of our past, he'd added one final text:

**For more on her condition**

*Call me*, he'd said.

And I should have, right away. Of course. It's what any decent person would do. I should have told the approaching reporter she could wait.

But there'd been the shattering glass and ceramic and my stopping to help.

And then I'd been numb and in shock.

And by now I'd put off that call for a half hour because seeing the words on my screen is bad enough—like reading a script. But hearing the words spoken will make it real.

And I am still needing it not to be real.

Even now, I could send the reporter away.

"I'd ordinarily *love* to keep our appointment for this interview," I might say, "but, you see, I've had some news I'd reason to believe I wouldn't receive—not any time soon. And I'm expected at the red carpet in not too many hours. I'm expected to emerge from the limo sleek and assured, with waxed legs and painted nails and no swollen eyes or dark circles by then. So won't you excuse me for now?"

Right now, I could send the reporter packing.

But I am Mia Jensen. Who planned out her dreams with meticulous care and unending drive—and made them happen. Who took her losses and launched herself out of a small town and hitchhiked all the way to L.A. and took Hollywood by its tail.

Mia Jensen. Who never looked back. Ever.

Until, perhaps, today.

Of all days.

"Excuse me," I tell the reporter abruptly, and she startles, her spare pen dropping from behind her ear. "Do forgive me a moment while I make a phone call I should have made a few moments ago, just as you arrived."

I do not wait for the response, sweet and deferential, that she has no choice but to make. I do like this about my life—about the Mia that is not the one Scott Sandlin remembers: People respond to me sweetly regardless of what they are feeling.

I step outside the patio gates, the cliffs dropping a hundred feet down to the sea. It may be partly the vertigo making me queasy, but also the man I am having to call, and the message he will have to relay.

I brace myself for the sound of his voice. And there it is.

"Hello, Mia. I'm so sorry. That I had to call."

"*I'm* so sorry. That you had to take this on."

The *sorrys* are words we never said to each other back then, when it might

have mattered.

But it's easier now, because the *sorrys* aren't about us anymore.

His voice is deeper than it was at eighteen, but the same gentle stir, the consonants always soft as a mountain breeze. As he speaks, I close my eyes and can see the Blue Ridge, their peaks tipped in white, the tumble of the waterfalls, the smell of the sun on pine and rhododendron. But then we are past the uneasy, whispered hellos. And what he has to say is a right hook to my gut.

*That's right, four.*

*No, she might not have told you exactly the truth, for fear you would worry.*

*They say we are looking at hours, days at best. Your mother says to stay there and no argument. It's the night of your life. There might not be another one like it.*

*Still, I thought you'd want to know.*

I hope I thank him before we hang up, but I'm not sure.

I'm aware of the waves slamming themselves into rock just below. And that my body's gone numb.

A few feet away on the path that winds past Las Brisas at the edge of the cliffs, a child whines. But it is several moments before I'm aware the child is saying my name. "But I made it for *her!* You said that was Mia right there, and I made it for her. *Pleeease* let me give it."

I try to pretend not to hear. But the girl is inching into my line of sight, her mother gripping one hand to keep her back from the cliffs.

Still, I plan to ignore her and am turning away—but am stopped by the brown curls. A head full of them. The girl must be no older than five, with ruddy cheeks.

The child holds something up for me to see, but I am staring, immobile, unable to lift my arm to hers.

*We'd have had a child that looked something like that, Scott and I, I hear myself think.*

And I hate myself for it—because Mia Jensen never looks back.

*God, I am coming undone.*

"Good morning, sugar," I manage at last.

The girl's eyes saucer with joy and the mother wraps both arms around her just like my mother held me when I was especially happy or especially sad.

My mother, who raised a daughter all by herself. Who fell into bed every night facedown on her pillow, immobilized by exhaustion. But who always managed a gentle word for her daughter and held me close when the world was scary and messy and mean.

Tears are welling behind my sunglasses now, and the audience can't be allowed to see that. I turn abruptly away on the heel of one sandal.

"Mia, for you!" cries the child and breaks from her mother's arms to block my path. She thrusts out an arm to present...a Coke bottle, it looks like. Covered in aluminum foil. At its top, she has included a tennis ball for a head and covered it over in foil, as well.

"It's—" her mother offers.

But I understand before she can say it, and I am quick to lean down to the child. "An Oscar. Oh my heavens, how perfect!"

And those watching—a small crowd has gathered nearby on the path—will assume my tears now are my being so touched. They wouldn't know that Mia Jensen has lost her composure and forgotten her script.

"I am so grateful," I say to the girl. "Thank you." I give her a hug, hurry away, and from a safe distance, wave.

"Good luck tonight!" somebody calls.

"I love your work!" someone else shouts from down the path.

*I want your life*, I know they are thinking. Perhaps even the child's mother. *I want to be you*.

Because they would assume I am a woman without any regrets.

I lift a hand to the reporter to assure her I'm returning now to our table. She has drained her second Chardonnay.

*Do you have any regrets*, she asked me—with no idea what she was asking.

But Mia Jensen has always known where she was going and never looked back.

"Are you sure?" my mother wanted to know as we sat by the lake the morning I left. "Are you certain this is the life that you want—not just the job, getting to act, but the whole different life that will come with it out there? Are you sure?"

She knew the answer.

But perhaps a mother is obligated to ask.

“I’ll send you back money when I make it big, Momma. I’ll send you back lots.”

*How grown-up I thought I was at the time to say that. How magnanimous.*

Grace had thrown her head back and laughed. “Have you really known me your whole life and still could think I ever want money from anyone, including you, my gifted Mia? What would I buy? A flannel shirt? A pair of jeans I paid good money for so that some underpaid child factory worker could slice holes through the knees, rather than working them in myself the real way?”

I would send checks home, all right. Every one of them cheerfully snipped into paper dolls.

Still laughing that day, Grace reached to stroke my cheek. But then her face fell and saddened. “What about Scott, my girl?”

I bristled, of course. And jerked away. “You lived your whole life without a man.”

Grace was silent. Then she glanced up, eyes twinkling. “There was the small detail of—”

“Right, okay, of my existence. Of the *sex*—is that what you want me to have to say in front of my mom?—the *sex* that got me here in the first place. Fine. But you’ve lived most of your life without the *help* of a man—or anyone else. And done a hell of a good job of it.”

Grace’s hand came back to my cheek. “You get that fierce independence from me, I suppose. And it can be a gift, Mia, I’ll say that.” Then Grace had bitten her lower lip. “But know this: Feeling like you can do anything and everything all on your own, that can also be a bit of a curse, if you let it.”

*Feeling like you can do anything and everything all on your own...*

“And your mother, the one who helped make the costumes for the school play,” the reporter is saying as I slide back into my seat. She is lifting her glass of wine and blinking as she finds it empty. She motions to our waitress for another. “Your mother still lives in the little town where you grew up?”

*Lives.*

How should I define *lives* for this reporter, who has no idea what she’s stumbled into with that one little word?

*Lives? Not for very much longer, I am tempted to say, with all the bitterness*

swelling inside like a tide.

*Take that, tipsy little reporter. See if you can keep the little that's left of your composure.*

With effort—and years of practice, I steady my voice. “My mother lives in the very same house that I grew up in, yes. Nothing fancy, but cozy. Next door to the very same family that lived there when I was growing up. The Sandlins. That is, the son lives in the house now. He was...a close friend.”

The reporter's pen slows on her pad, her eyes lifting to me. She suspects there is something more here in these words I tacked on. And she is right.

Another point, then, for the tipsy reporter.

“A...close friend?”

“A good guy.” I grip my phone so hard I can almost feel the words of the text cutting into my flesh. “A really good guy.”

*I wish I were contacting you for a happier reason...*

“The kind of guy who has apparently checked on my mother regularly while she's been sick.”

“Oh.” The reporter blinks again. Her frozen smile says she was hoping we weren't headed for something sad or heavy. She is unarmed for this.

I shake my head. “Of all the men I've dated here over the past twenty years...”

She nods eagerly, hoping for a detail or two. She has read of my romances, I see.

“Of all those, I can't think of a single one who'd have done that. Checked every day on a neighbor who's sick. I'm sure of it. Not one.” I lay a hand over her pad. “Although, better not to publish that part.” I am not being kind so much as recalling what these men could tell reporters of *me* in return.

Dutifully, she scratches through something she'd just scrawled and looks up. “I'm sorry to hear your mother's sick.”

“Breast cancer. Stage four, it turns out.”

She sucks in air through gathered lips.

“Yeah. Exactly. That number *four* was not shared with me. Until today.”

*Although I never took the time to call the doctor myself. Because I trusted what was told to me.*

*And because—let's be honest—because I had other things on my mind.*

“Oh. My. Mia. With the awards ceremony and all, I mean. And your clearly needing to be here for that. What bad timing for you.”

“It’s a whole lot worse timing for *her*.” The words come out harshly, which I can see in the reporter’s drawing back, the melting of her frozen smile.

“Of course. Mia, I didn’t mean to imply... And today of all days!”

I want to shake the girl till her frizzy brown bob falls out of her head and her tortoiseshell glasses tumble into her wine.

Which isn’t quite fair, I realize. It isn’t this poor little reporter on her third glass of wine that I am so angry at.

“She told me not to come home,” I hear myself say. “She made me promise that if she ever someday took a turn for the worse—even more of the worse—that I wouldn’t come home. Not if it conflicted with...with anything even remotely important, she said.”

“She knew? About tonight? That the Oscars were coming up?” The reporter seems to be processing this slowly.

“Of course. She was out here to visit not long ago...”

Out here to visit, as always, because I never went back there. Too busy. And maybe too many things there that might feel like regrets if I had to see them again.

Or see *him* again.

“She was back here to visit, and she was doing okay.”

“Or she *told* you she was,” the reporter muses—more to her wine than me, I realize.

Still, I give her a hard stare.

“That is... I didn’t mean—”

“No. Of course not. A writer never means to imply.” I hear the defensiveness in my voice, and I can see a director shaking his head: *Mia, your character is experiencing grief. You should be playing this scene as sad, not angry.*

But grief can be funny that way, I am learning—spinning one emotion around blindfolded until it comes staggering out a side exit, changed. I shake my head at the reporter. “But you might be right. It may have just been what she told me. And what the neighbor, Scott—”

“Your *friend*,” she interjects with a smirk that is probably the result of glass number three, and also of watching too many chick flicks where nobody

leaves town and stays gone. And where nobody dies.

“What Scott assured me because, no doubt, that’s what she told him. And what I wanted to believe. But she walked all over the Paramount lot—and if she ever so much as winced, I didn’t see it. Even when she said she wouldn’t fly out for...” I stare out at the sea. “For tonight.”

“For the Oscars. For your first nomination. And your *win*. Which, you know, you could accept in her honor, right?”

I give a single nod. I have no energy to add a more humble *if I win*.

I hear myself explaining—voice rising, needing this scene of mine to persuade the audience, to evoke sympathy for the character’s choices—how I came to be here, sitting at a Las Brisas table overlooking an ocean on the other side of the country from a dying mother I genuinely care for and an old friend that, yes, I also once loved. I gesture to my yellow BMW convertible just a few yards and one valet tip away from driving to Pasadena. I am explaining how from there, my other home, I will dress for the evening—even though I am grief-gutted now—because it was what my mother insisted I do if it came to this, a decision.

“She made me promise,” I say. “Just in case, she insisted. Though she would be fine. And then she wanted to see the dress I’d had made.”

The dress. The one I’d dreamed of since I watched *Casablanca* for the first time at age seven and knew this was what I would do with my life. Like Ilsa’s plane rising up through the fog, there would be no stopping me.

The reporter lurches forward, her eagerness enhanced by glass number three. “Do tell me about the dress. I’ll see it tonight, of course, but the readers would *loove* the details.”

The readers of the *New York Times* don’t give a damn about the details of my dress, I know full well. But I tell her because she’s young and she wants to know and the dress is an easier thing to conjure up in my head than my mother’s face nearing death, or Scott’s as he called to tell me.

“Giorgio Armani designed it for me.” I give her what she’s wanting so my mind can wander elsewhere while I speak. “It’s black—did I say that? The color is black.” I chose it long before I knew I’d be in mourning. “It’s basically a shimmering set of slits and plunges.”

“That will require some care when easing into your limo.” She is gushing

again, and I cringe. “When you’re driven to the Dolby Theatre to stroll down the red carpet you’ve been waiting your *whole life* to walk!” The reporter bends low over her pad and squints at what she is writing—the letters have to be blurring by now.

“My mother said she’d love to come out for the Oscars, but that she was just a little bit tired from work—too tired to fly. Made me promise again I wouldn’t miss going. No matter what. She even said—but her voice was so strong, cheery even, it just seemed like just something random she wanted to say—she reminded me what a nice time we’d had in L.A. when she’d come, how we’d already said our good-byes in the best way, when we were both laughing and feeling fine.”

The reporter lifts her glass, but this time only holds it and sets it back down. “But now... Today...”

“On this day of all days...” I fix my gaze back on the sea. “She’s...” I do not deliver the word aloud. Because that would make it too real. I try again. “When Scott—”

“The name of the very dear friend,” the reporter supplies. And I see the question behind her words.

But I ignore what she doesn’t ask. “When I talked to him on the phone just a few moments ago, he said Grace was still insisting adamantly, for all to hear, that I not come home—on today of all days.”

The reporter lifts her glass in a kind of toast. “How nice, how *really* nice you can be there tonight, then—guilt-free. For the crowning achievement of a brilliant career. What would it be to miss *that*, after all?”

I stare at her lifted glass. Her toast to my brilliant career. To all I’ve achieved. And my stomach twists in on itself.

The marimba of my iPhone just now makes me drop the cell—I’d been gripping it like some sort of lifeline. The screen of the phone, which lands faceup, says it is only my agent calling.

I stare stupidly at my cell as it rings a second and third time. To the diners around us, not even pretending now not to watch, I must look like I’ve forgotten how to answer a phone.

“It’s my agent,” I tell the circle of curious faces. “Checking how the interview went. And how I’m feeling about tonight.” They’ve made

themselves part of this drama, so why not include them now?

It rings a fourth and a fifth time, but I only watch it vibrate its way across the table.

Now I am on my feet and slinging the strap of my purse over my shoulder. “Forgive me.” I address the circle of faces and the tipsy little reporter. “But I need to go.”

With a swipe of one finger and no greeting, I ask my agent at the other end of the phone, “How much to charter a plane?”

Silence from the other end of the cell. And from the circle of baffled faces.

Only the reporter responds. “Of course. Wait. What?” Sloshing wine down her blouse, she totters up to her feet.

“You asked about regrets a moment ago. Thank you for that. Because whatever of those I’ve had before, or not, I don’t intend to add more.”

Whipping a handful of twenties from my wallet, I present them and the aluminum Oscar to our waitress, who is standing, wide-eyed. “Thank you for your good work. And please know that it is, in fact, good. I’m sorry I have to rush off.”

Nodding knowingly, the waitress beams. “You don’t want to be late for tonight.”

“No,” I agree, calling back over my shoulder. “No, I do not.”

# THE SUICIDE

A.F. BRADY

**I**T HURTS. I'M NOT GOING to say it doesn't hurt and pretend like I'm tough. It hurts, but less than everything else. That's the whole point. Once this is done, none of the other things will matter anymore. This is the last hurt.

I'm sitting on the bathroom floor. The tile is cold and hard and it's making the bones in my butt sore. I'm listening to Nirvana. I always listen to Nirvana, but I'm listening even more now because Kurt offed himself, and if he can do it then I can, too. Everything else just sounds like noise to me. The lights in here are incredibly bright, so I turned them off and brought in some candles and the lava lamp I bought at Urban Outfitters last year. The orange globs seem to flow with the beat of the music. I have to have mood lighting if I'm going to do this or else it just feels like surgery. I don't really want to see it, either. I've never had a stomach for blood.

I got this knife from my ex-boyfriend, Jordan. Well, I didn't *get* it from him, I guess I sort of stole it from him, but it wasn't on purpose. He left it in my car and I just never gave it back to him. He said it's called a butterfly knife, and he showed me all these flippy things he could do with it. He would whip it around and do tricks, the same way he used to do with his Zippo lighter.

Sometimes I would smoke cigarettes with him when it wasn't swim season, but these days I'm always in training. I'm not allowed to smoke, but it doesn't matter now because I won't be at practice tomorrow. I won't ever be at practice again.

There isn't any blood yet because I haven't pushed down, but there are red welts rising up on my wrist. I saw my dad gut a fish once, and it seemed so effortless. I know if I just push down a little bit, I'll break the skin. And then once I break the skin, it'll be a lot easier to get down to the veins. I made sure to get the dog's towels from the garage, because I know my mother would pitch a fit if I got blood on any of the good towels. She still brings up that time I got my period when I was thirteen and ruined the sheets. That was almost four years ago, and she still won't let it go.

My parents aren't home, and they won't be back until late because there's an event at the club tonight, and they'll drink too much and pass out when they get home. I wonder how long it'll take for them to realize I'm gone.

Sometimes I wish I could fake my death and then go to my own funeral, just to hear what people have to say. I wonder if they'll finally care about *me*—the real me, not just the trophy child, the champion swimmer. They'll probably list my best swim times, and the mean girls will pretend they were my best friends, and Jordan will pretend I was the love of his life and he didn't cheat on me with Sharon Murdock at the spring formal. Whatever they say, I won't hear them because I'll be all dressed up in some designer dress, with too much makeup on my colorless face, cold and dead in a long pine box. I don't even have it in me to get angry anymore. I'm almost seventeen years old and I've lost all the highs and lows. I live somewhere in the middle—somewhere where I never feel anything more than a dull ache.

I know I'm just distracting myself with all these thoughts now—delaying the inevitable. I'm doing this, it's the only way. I'm doing it tonight. I've been thinking about this date for months, and I said I would be dead before midnight, so I really only have a couple of hours to go, and I have to make sure that the scene is set for whoever finds me.

I fed Dante and gave him his arthritis medicine. I'm going to miss him. Dante is the only one who cares about me. He sleeps in bed with me every night. He's a giant German shepherd and we just barely fit in my little bed. I

sleep on my side, and he curls up behind my knees. He wakes up every morning five minutes before my alarm goes off and starts licking my toes. Normally, he'd be sitting right here with me, but I was afraid he would look at me with his huge brown eyes and I wouldn't be able to go through with it, so I left him outside. As if he can hear me thinking about him, Dante starts barking. He probably wants to come in.

My watch says 9:57 p.m.

I still have time.

The only stability I know is when my hand falls at my side and Dante slides in beside me and my fingers twirl the long hair of his German shepherd mane. But it's only so comforting to ask a dog all my life's questions and be met endlessly with a cocked head, a wet snout poking at my listless hands, and truly unconditional love. Undeserved and boundlessly available. I will miss Dante more than he will ever know. Hearing him barking now, I head downstairs to open the door to the porch and whistle through the screen into the night. The crickets and tree frogs are so loud, and it's not even summer yet.

"Dante!" I call into the darkness. The lights by the pool are on but I can't see the dog. I whistle again. He's not coming. His barks are getting more frequent and louder.

"Dante! Shut up!" But he doesn't shut up. I grab a jar of peanut butter from the cupboard and head outside to get him.

"Dante," I whisper once I'm outside. I whistle softly and follow the sound of his barks. He always comes when I call him—he's well-trained and obedient—but tonight he's not listening to me.

My watch says 10:02 p.m.

I still have time.

I see the dog standing in front of the shed out behind the pool. We haven't used that shed since a family of raccoons clawed through the walls and ate the pool noodles and kickboards we stored in there. My parents never bothered to replace it or knock it down. Now Dante is standing with his ears pricked up, eyes trained on the door. His barks are sharp and alert. There's something in there.

I open the jar of peanut butter and waft it near his face. "Come on, Dante.

Come back inside and I'll give you all the peanut butter you want." He doesn't even sniff in my direction. He maintains his posture and stares at the door of the shed. I loop two fingers under his thick leather collar and gently pull him toward the house. "Come *on*," I whine, tugging at him. "Let's go."

He lets out a loud bark and shakes my hand from his collar. He sits down, tail straight out behind him, and stares at the shed. It occurs to me that I should be apprehensive about whatever is hiding in there. Dante has never defied commands, and he's never shown any interest in this broken-down old box. I'm not scared of what's hiding in my shed, because what do I have left to lose? Being fearful comes from being afraid of losing something. Losing your safety, your precious well-being. Mine is gone. I have nothing left.

I still have the memories of what it felt like for adrenaline to pump in my veins. When I find myself in a situation that warrants an adrenaline rush, I almost look down and expect to see my veins coursing with something other than plain, boring, slow and steady misery. I remember what it was supposed to feel like, but the further away I get from the memories, the foggier they become. If I were to live, I would lose sight completely of what it all felt like.

With the jar of Skippy in one hand, I reach out to the door of the shed. Once the animal is out, I'm sure Dante will scare him off. I have plans, and I can't waste my time with some creature hiding in the darkness. I've already lost enough time.

Suddenly Dante jumps up and throws himself between me and the shed, preventing me from reaching the door. He uses his big anvil head to push me out of the way and stands protectively in front of me. He is agitated, and his lips are curling up over his teeth. There's something dangerous in there. I should be scared of whatever is making Dante behave this way. If he senses danger, I should react to it, too. All I feel is exhausted.

He's pushing me back toward the safety of the house. He stopped barking, but his hackles are up. Is there a person in there? Does someone know that I am home alone tonight?

I back away slowly, holding on to the peanut butter as if it were a weapon. I shouldn't have left that stupid butterfly knife upstairs in the bathroom. I pull Dante's collar, and it strikes me how absurd this situation is. If there's a murderer in there, I might as well let *him* kill me. Maybe it'll be easier than

pushing the knife down through my own flesh. I pause, rationalizing the thoughts in my head. I knew I was going to die tonight, I just didn't realize that someone else was going to kill me.

I have butterflies in my stomach for the first time in as long as I can remember. It's not fear, it's more like excitement. I move toward the shed, trying my best to hold Dante behind me as he snarls and pulls and tries to protect me. If he hadn't been barking I wouldn't be out here in the first place, now he's trying to pull me back into the house.

"I'm going to kill myself anyway, you silly dog," I whisper to him. My palms are sweating, and I creep closer. I'm holding my breath, but I hardly realize it as I lunge forward and throw the door open. Before the light from the pool can shine on the face of the murderer, Dante launches himself into the shed, and furiously snaps and barks at the figure inside.

"Stop, stop! Help!" A desperate and terrified voice screams from the darkness. It's not a huge, deep murderer's voice. It's small and scared and not at all what I thought I would find in here. I drop the peanut butter and yank at Dante's collar with both hands. He's pulling against me, but he seems just as surprised as I am that the figure in the shed isn't that of a dangerous killer. He's a kid, probably just a couple of years younger than I am. Terrified in the corner, with his arms in defense up over his face.

Dante lets me pull him away and retreats out onto the lawn. I step back and push the door open, so the light can illuminate the kid's features.

"Please," he says. "I'm sorry, I'm not trying to hurt anyone. Please, don't let him bite me." He's still shielding his face, and his dirty sneakers and frayed backpack look like that of any typical teenager around here.

"Who are you?" I ask, more disappointed than anything else.

"Vince," he says, lowering his arms so I can see his face. "My name is Vince. I'm sorry I scared you."

"What are you doing in my shed?" I finally release the breath I've been holding, and the butterflies in my stomach disappear.

"I was hiding, but I'll leave." He starts to stand up and feels around on the floor for the strap of his backpack.

"No, you don't have to leave." I hear the words as I'm saying them, and I have no idea why I'm inviting Vince to stay in my shed. "Well, I mean, if you

want to go, you can go, but you don't have to." I look behind me out at the lawn and see Dante still watching me.

"You're Mia Jensen, aren't you?" he asks, cowering back down on the ground.

"What?" I step back. "How do you know my name?"

"I go to Whitmore," he says. "I'm a few years behind you. You're a junior, right?"

"Yeah, what grade are you in?"

"I'm in eighth grade," Vince says, looking around at the inside of the shed now that the light from the pool area is exposing the details.

"And what did you say you were doing in my shed?" He's younger, and he knows who I am, which makes me feel like I need to live up to my reputation. I am supposed to be a young leader in my community. The sports stars are always looked at this way.

"I was *hiding* in your shed, but now that you and your dog are here, I should probably go." He starts to get up again, this time going so far as to sling his backpack over one shoulder.

"No," I say, still unsure why. "Stay here." I look at my watch, realizing Vince probably isn't going to kill me, so I'll have to do it myself.

It's 10:18 p.m.

I still have time.

"Are you sure? Aren't your parents going to be mad?"

"My parents won't be home for hours, and they wouldn't even notice." I sigh and slump down on the damp, rotten slats across from him.

There's something flashing behind my eyes that could be the beginning of a migraine, or it could be a sliver of hope. There's something about his face, his gangly knees and hard-bitten fingernails. Even though I'm in a place where I fear no harm, it's his harmlessness that appeals to me. I should have been scared. I wasn't. So, I invite him to stay. Stay, and show me how harmless people can be. Please. It's what I need my last experience to be. Show me that expectations can be wrong. Show me that someone has some care and some compassion and some humanity. Please. Just so I can see it before I go.

"You're bleeding," Vince says, as he pulls a white deli napkin from his pocket. "Did the dog get you?"

I look down at my wrist and see the cuts from Jordan's old butterfly knife are bleeding. "Dante would never bite me." I take the napkin and put pressure on the small cuts.

I whistle softly, calling the dog into the shed. He glides in the door, and promptly lies down with his face on my lap.

"So how come you're bleeding?" Vince asks.

I stroke Dante's velvet ears. I didn't think I would find myself in a position tonight where I would have to explain what I was doing. That's why I picked tonight, because I would be alone, and no one would ask questions. I knew my parents would be out. I knew no one in the neighborhood would be home because everyone who's anyone is at the club. Bidding on luxurious auction items and lubricating themselves with more and more alcohol so they can be comfortable parting with more and more of their money.

The grown-ups have been talking about tonight for months, gossiping about which items they planned to bid on, and what they donated. My parents even toyed with the idea of auctioning off swim lessons with me. They got into a fight because my mother said the bidding should start at a thousand dollars, and my father said that was a ridiculously high price to pay just to swim with me. I listened to them fighting from my room. In the end, they didn't donate anything at all, so they feel even more compelled to bid tonight.

"I cut myself," I respond, my mind refocusing on my plan for the evening.

"On purpose?" Vince asks.

I breathe in deeply through my nose and hold the air in my chest for as long as I can. This is what makes me the best swimmer in our town, probably in the state. I have excellent breath control. My coach keeps telling me I'll make the Olympics. Once my lungs begin to burn, I let out the breath and answer Vince's question.

"Yes, on purpose."

"How come? Are you trying to kill yourself?"

Only teenagers can talk to each other this way. If a grown-up asked me this same question, I would never answer honestly. Vince just wants to know what's wrong, but a grown-up wants someone to blame. A grown-up would ask me this, ignore my response, and start pointing fingers at anyone they could find. I would be lost in the finger-pointing and no one would notice as

I slit my wrists in the bathtub, listening to Nirvana, on April 5, 1995, the one-year anniversary of the day Kurt killed himself and gave me the strength to finally go through with it. *That's* what would happen if a grown-up asked. But since Vince is asking, and Vince is younger than I am, I tell him the truth.

“Yes.” A sense of calm falls over me as I admit my plans to a stranger in my shed. I feel a slow, creaky relief, like I loosened a fist I've been clenching for years.

“Why do you want to kill yourself?” Vince asks honestly and without any judgment in his voice.

“Does it really matter what I say right now?” I've rehearsed this conversation in my head a thousand times. Knowing if I ever told anyone, I would have to convince them that I have reason enough. That I feel bad enough. That I've thought of every other solution already. “Whatever I tell you, you'll try to talk me out of it.”

He shrugs his narrow shoulders. “Try me.”

“You think you'll really listen to what I have to say? And not just try to find a reason to think I'm making the wrong decision?” I don't want to be talked out of this. I have talked myself into and out of suicide a hundred times before. The last thing I need is someone else's opinion.

“What do you mean?” Vince shifts his weight around, leaning his bony elbows on his bony knees.

“I read these articles about people who committed suicide. The writers are always talking about how the victim was good-looking, rich, and privileged, as if it's supposed to make a difference. As if poor people, or ugly people, or stupid people all have a reason to kill themselves, but beautiful people don't. I think it's terrible. What they're saying is that it would be understandable if the victim didn't have all these things that society forces you to think equal happiness. Just because I'm tall and people think I'm pretty, it doesn't make me happy. You see how stupid that sounds? Just because I'm a good swimmer doesn't mean I'm happy. Everyone is allowed to be miserable, no matter how much good stuff you have. Look at Kurt Cobain. He had everything. But he was miserable.” My response comes out too forcefully. I've been holding these thoughts in for too long, and they're coming out like the whining tirade of a misguided preacher. I just want someone to understand me. I've been so

afraid that people can't understand that just because I have these things that other people might not have, I still don't want this life.

"Are *you* miserable?" It sounds like Vince is trying to grasp what I'm saying, but he clearly hasn't spent months rolling the virtues of suicide over in his mind.

"I don't like it here. I don't belong here, and I don't want to be here anymore. It's as simple as that." The promises of youth, teenage invincibility—I'm supposed to think I know it all. I'm supposed to see the brightest future before me. I must be missing a chip or something, because all I've ever felt is lost.

"But it seems like you're doing such a good job in your life, you know?" His innocence is tugging at my heartstrings. "You're popular, you're smart, you're a great swimmer. Everyone knows you, they all think you're great." He still thinks that if you can just check all those boxes then you'll be happy.

"It doesn't matter if everyone thinks I'm great if I don't agree with them."

Vince shakes his head, confused. "So, you're killing yourself because you don't think you're great?"

"Sounds stupid when you say it like that." I look away from him. Maybe eventually he'll comprehend, but for now he's just confirming that no one gets me.

"That's what *you* just said. I didn't say it like that."

"What are you doing hiding in my shed?" I'm feeling defensive now.

"I ran away from home." He responds without hesitation.

"Why did you run away?" I feel exposed, worried that I've said too much, and I want to even the playing field.

"It doesn't matter. I just needed to get out, I guess. I was hiding in your shed because I thought no one would find me, and I don't want to explain myself to anyone."

"That's exactly how I felt before I found you in here. I didn't think I was ever going to see anyone *again* after I got home from school today. So, you *have* to tell me." I smile, trying to show him that I'm not going to judge.

"You wouldn't understand. It's stupid." Vince pulls at the cobwebs in the corner of the shed and twirls them together between his fingers. Dante is staring at the peanut butter jar.

“I think if anyone can understand it’s probably me. And hey, you know your secret is safe. A dead girl can’t tell secrets.” My defense wanes as my mind drifts to the scene I was trying to set upstairs in my bathroom. The tub filled with bloody water. I wonder if anyone will see the significance of the water. I wish I could just drown myself in the pool. Maybe the bathtub scene will be too difficult for anyone to understand. Maybe it’s too subtle and nuanced.

“I’m failing school,” Vince says.

“Wait.” I’m distracted by my own thoughts and I’m not sure I heard him right. “Did you say you’re failing school?”

“Yeah.” Vince pulls a stick of beef jerky from his backpack and starts peeling off the wrapper. My stomach growls, I haven’t eaten anything tonight. “When my parents get my grades at the end of term, they’re going to lose it. I’ll be held back, and I won’t go to high school next fall.” Vince’s voice is defeated. “You’re like a straight-A student, right?” he asks.

“Yeah, pretty much. I’m getting a B in physics right now.”

Vince tears into his Slim Jim. “Doesn’t really matter, though, right? I mean, if you’re killing yourself.”

“Right, I won’t need to worry about that.” I lean back and examine the superficial wounds on my wrist. “I didn’t think of it like that. If I kill myself tonight, I won’t have to hand in the statistics test I have due on Monday, either.”

My watch says 10:36 p.m.

I still have time.

“You just said ‘if’ you kill yourself tonight. I thought you were definitely going to do it.”

“I am,” I say, suddenly feeling unsure. “I am. It’s just that I’ve never skipped an assignment before. It sort of feels weird.”

“I skip them all the time. You’ll get used to it.”

Vince chews his jerky, and I unscrew the cap of the peanut butter. I scoop out a dollop for Dante and smear it on the back of my left hand where he can lick it off, then take one for myself. I am thinking about the statistics test. It’s already finished. I did it yesterday after practice. I know I’ll get an A because statistics make sense to me. I’ve been accidentally doing them since I started swimming competitively when I was five. Comparing my times to the other

kids' times. Figuring out how many milliseconds I need to shave off to make some team or impress some coach. I know statistics too well.

"What will happen if you get left back?" I shake the thoughts from my head and try to focus on Vince's problems.

"I don't know for sure, but I know I don't want to find out. That's why I left. My parents went to this event tonight, so I figured I would have a big head start. They might not even be awake tomorrow morning when I'm supposed to be getting up for school."

"You mean the spring benefit at Willow Ponds, right? My parents are there, too."

"Yeah. I think they'd be really disappointed to tell their friends that I got held back and didn't even make it to high school. Especially since my older sister just got into Yale."

"*That's rough,*" I say, mouth sticky with peanut butter. "How come you're failing?"

"I just stopped paying attention. I didn't do the readings anymore, and my assignments weren't good. Mr. Reilly sent me home with my last exam. My parents were supposed to sign it to prove that they know I'm failing. I forged my mom's signature." Vince seems disappointed and hurt like a good kid gone wrong.

"I had Reilly for history, too. He's such a jerk. How come you stopped paying attention?" I hand him the jar of Skippy, and Vince takes a scoop with his fingers.

"My parents got separated. My dad moved into the little apartment above the garage. It used to be where our nanny lived when I was younger, but she left last summer. They didn't tell anyone because they didn't want to look bad, you know how people are around here. They barely talk to each other, and they're both angry all the time." Vince starts shaking his head and wringing his hands together. His eyes are watering. "My sister is going to leave for Yale in August, and I'll be alone with them. And they're gonna be so mad at me."

"Where are you going to run to? No offense, it just doesn't seem like running away from home is going to fix your problem."

"Yeah, I realize that. It just got to be too much. Sitting at home, listening to them hating one another, and knowing that when I admit I'm failing, they'll

both blame the other one and hate each other even more. I don't want to do that."

"You know it's not your fault, though, right? I mean, you didn't make them break up."

He looks at me incredulously. This is the kind of thing a grown-up would say to him, and I don't think he believes me. "How come you're talking to me?" he asks.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, how come you decided to stay here and talk to me instead of throwing me out, or calling the cops or something?"

I can't tell him that I want him to prove that the world isn't as hopeless as it appears. I can't put that burden on him. "Maybe I wanted to have one last conversation with someone."

"Sounds really final when you say it like that. You sure you're going to do it?"

"I already made the decision." I scratch Dante's wide head, and his eyebrows twitch at me. "It's too late now. I thought that if I just pleased everyone enough, then they would notice me. If I could just swim fast enough, they would let me stop. Then they would let me be me, and not just a swimmer. It's empty. There's no peace."

Vince stares at me with his eyes in slits. Examining me. "You shouldn't kill yourself," he says. "You should quit swimming." He tears open a bag of M&M's and throws a handful into his mouth.

"I've already made this decision, Vince."

"Maybe you should wait, though. Quit swimming and see what happens. If you're not a swimmer anymore, then you can actually *see* if they care about the real you or not. It won't be a question." He shrugs his shoulders. Nonchalant. Like this is the perfect solution.

"I can't—I can't do *that*." I reach out toward his package of M&M's, and he shakes a few into my palm. "It's not a question, anyway. I know they don't care."

"Do you even *like* swimming?" he asks, suddenly seeming like a Magic 8-Ball, filled with frustrating answers.

"I used to love swimming, but I don't like what it's turned into. It's like a

business more than a sport. It's never enough. They just want me to go to the Olympics, so they can say they are the parents to an Olympian, or the coach of an Olympian." I'm afraid I sound like I'm whining. Like my reasons aren't good enough. It's not about what happens *to* you, it's about what happens *inside* of you. Something inside of me died, and I can't explain it to Vince, or to anyone else. This isn't some teenage tragedy you see on television. Since I made this decision, I've stood a little taller, felt a little freer, and the fog has cleared. Now that I've made this decision, I feel better for the first time.

"Maybe it won't feel so empty if you've got nothing to fill, you know?" He doesn't understand that it's too late now. I know it's the only way to find peace.

"You're really smart, Vince." I steer the conversation away from me. "I can't believe you're failing out of school."

"Yeah, I can't, either." His demeanor shifts when we return to talking about his problems as opposed to mine. "How are you going to do it? Slit your wrists?"

"I feel stupid talking about the details. It's embarrassing." The last piece of my still-beating heart is breaking. I want Vince to hear me, but he's just offering alternative solutions. I already have a solution.

"I'm hiding in your shed because I'm failing out of school. You think *you're* embarrassed?"

"Ugh." I take another deep, swimmer's breath. "Yes, I'm going to slit my wrists, and lie in the bathtub so the hot water helps me bleed out faster." I never thought I would be saying these words out loud. It sounds so graphic. I hear myself say "bleed out" and all I can imagine is the feeling of my body shriveling up.

"What are you going to wear?" Vince asks.

Instead of answering, I pull up my sweatshirt to show Vince the Olympic logo on the chest of the swimsuit I have on.

"Wow, dead swimmer in a pool of blood."

We both fall silent and drop our heads against the rotting walls behind us. Dante stirs, noticing the discomfort in the air, and turns to look at me. Those big brown eyes I was afraid would stop me from killing myself are looking at me, showing me the love I always wanted to find. Only Dante understands

me.

Whatever glimmer of hope I had that Vince would prove that someone gets me is fading away. Even a teenager, someone unwilling to face his problems, even he can't support me in my decision. If Vince didn't show up in my shed tonight to convince me not to kill myself, then maybe there's another reason he is here. Maybe he is giving me an opportunity for one last act. One last show of good faith. Something to remember me by.

"You know what I'm thinking about right now?" I ask, shifting my head to look at Vince.

"What?" He blinks and rubs his eyes.

"I can help you. I had Reilly for history in eighth grade. I got straight A's in eighth grade."

He shakes his head, knowing exactly where I'm going with this suggestion. "It's way too late for that now. I would have to get an A on every assignment and every final in every class just to get passing grades for the semester."

"I can get you A's."

"How?" He flops his arms in his lap. "Not if you're going to kill yourself."

"I have a file in my room upstairs with every assignment I ever did in school. I have everything from eighth grade up there."

"Why would you do that for me?" His eyes widen, looking at me like no one has ever offered him a helping hand before.

"Why wouldn't I? It's not like those are going to be useful now, anyway."

"Yeah, but it'd be cheating. I don't want to cheat, that would get me in just as much trouble."

"You're not cheating. It's not like the tests are going to be exactly the same. I'm just giving you a head start."

"How am I going to get away with that?" He's sitting at attention now, and it looks like the idea is beginning to appeal to him.

"We won't have to tell anyone, so your parents will never find out that you're failing. You'll pass your classes and you'll make it to high school. I promise."

I don't want Vince to feel inadequate. I don't want him to feel the pain I've felt and know the suffering I've known. I can see a reflection of myself in him. A kid who wants to live up to impossible expectations.

Vince fiddles with the strap of his backpack. He tucks the Slim Jim wrapper into a mesh pocket and nibbles on the stumps of his fingernails. “Are you going to quit swimming?”

I have imagined many times before what it would be like to quit. I wouldn't have all the eyes on me, the pressure to perform. But I wouldn't have the only identity I know, either. “I don't know,” I respond, knowing full well I could never stop swimming.

“I can't take your old work if you're just going to kill yourself tonight. That's not right.” The excitement I thought I heard in his voice wanes, and his rigid body collapses back into a familiar posture of defeat.

“Where do you live?” I ask. I'm not going to let him leave here tonight without a way out.

“At 407 Wallace. It's on the other side of town, near the 7-Eleven on Smith Street. Why?”

“I have a plan.” I stand up, hitching my pants, and gently tug Dante's collar. Vince takes my lead and rises to his feet. “What do we do?”

I check my watch: 11:37 p.m.

I still have time.

“Do you have your own phone in your room?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Go home. Call me as soon as you get there, so I know you didn't just run away to a different shed or something.”

“How will you know it's me?”

“I have caller ID in my room.” My voice is getting louder. “If you call, I'll know that you made it home. And if I answer, you'll know that I didn't kill myself tonight.” He gives me a pen from his backpack, and I write the number to my private line on one of his paper napkins.

“You won't do it?” His eyes are hopeful, and his voice is excited again. He writes down his number and hands it to me.

“Just call me when you get home. We don't have time now, but I will get the file to you.”

Vince straps his backpack to his back. He holds out his pinkie to me. “Promise me you'll never tell anyone I was in your shed tonight.”

I loop his pinkie in mine. “I promise I will never tell a soul.”

We kiss our fists and swear on it that our secrets will forever stay in the shed. He scans the floor and gathers his things to leave. “You’re not going to do it, right? I mean, if I leave here, you won’t go back upstairs and slit your wrists, right?” He’s worried.

“There’s still twenty minutes until midnight. If you run, you can get home before your parents do. I’ll send you the file. Run. Call me when you get to your room.” I don’t quite answer his question. “Go,” I whisper and gently push him out the door.

“I’ll call you when I get home.” He slowly backs away from me, hesitating.

“Go, Vince. Hurry.”

He draws in a deep, shaky breath and jogs out past the part of the yard illuminated by the pool lights. I can hear his footsteps as they break into a run on the pavement.

I look into the shed and feel the warmth from our body heat escaping through the open door. I hope he makes it home before his parents, and he’ll never have to explain where he was tonight. I hope these secrets are buried with me.

As I walk back toward my house, I feel like I’m approaching the end of a book that I didn’t quite like but didn’t quite hate, either. Tonight has become the last page of that book, and Vince became the epilogue. It was already over before I walked into the shed, and he just wrote the last lines.

Dante lumbers through the porch door that I left open when I went to investigate the barking. We walk into my bathroom together, and I blow out the candles and unplug the lava lamp. Nirvana is still playing. “All Apologies” comes on as I turn on the faucet, and I rest my head against the tub and listen to the words.

I think of Vince and his innocence and wisdom. He’ll call me soon. I want to make sure he gets all my work, no matter what happens tonight. All the assignments I ever handed in, all the tests and notes from every class I’ve taken since fourth grade are organized and filed in hanging folders under my window seat. I pull out the file marked “eighth grade” and wrap it in brown packaging paper. I write Vince’s name and address on the package, add a couple of stamps, and walk down the stairs to the front door. My dad’s car isn’t back in the driveway, so Dante and I hurry to the mailbox. I flip the red

flag up and hope the mailman comes before anyone else notices that I left a package here tonight.

Dante whines as we get back to the front door, and I bend down to kiss him. Growing up in a house with no siblings, a dog who is bigger than I am became the only living thing that I trust. I have never used that word to describe a relationship with a person. I trust this dog and he trusts me. I look into his huge brown eyes and press my face against his snout. He licks my cheeks as the tears start falling. “I love you, you silly dog.” I push open the door, and he sits on the front step. He doesn’t stop me from going upstairs alone. Dante is the only one who understands me.

I look at my watch. 11:54 p.m.

I don’t have any more time.

I take off my jeans and sweatshirt and fold them delicately on top of the toilet tank. Little splinters of rotten wood sprinkle onto the white tile floor. I pick up Jordan’s butterfly knife and start flipping it around like he used to. It’s weighty and the blade is sharp. It feels dangerous in my hand.

I wasn’t looking for answers tonight. I wasn’t looking to be convinced otherwise. I guess I just wanted to talk to someone one last time. As I slide into the hot water running into my bathtub, I hear the phone on my bedside table begin to ring.

# THE PRIMATOLOGIST

HEATHER GUDENKAUF

IT'S MY LAST DAY IN the Congo, and a rare sound catches my attention. It's not Matthieu, who has had his fill of kfumo leaves and now has turned his attention to Kibibi and Odette, an adult female bonobo and her two-year-old daughter who are searching for grubs.

It's not the familiar chatter of the other rescued bonobos talking to one another, nor the buzz of mosquitoes dancing past my ears. It's not the whoosh of a flying squirrel gliding from tree to tree, and it's not the crash of juvenile bonobos tumbling around the undergrowth in play, but something much more substantial, unsettling. I hold my breath.

Someone not familiar with the area might think it's a troop of gorillas. Rarely confrontational, Lowland gorillas' aggressive display of tearing branches, hooting, and pounding their chests is terrifying, not to mention they can weigh up to four hundred pounds.

But lowland gorillas don't live on this side of the river, and that can only mean a predator of a different sort is nearby.

I stay low, out of sight. Matthieu hears it, too. His body tenses, his eyes dart from side to side. Kibibi and Odette appear oblivious. Four men come into sight, and the bonobos skitter off into the forest. I fight the urge to join them.

Two of the men appear to be from a nearby village. Guides, I'm guessing. They are young, barely in their teens and wary looking. They know they aren't supposed to be here.

The other two men, dressed in what look to be brand-new, expensive outdoor gear, whisper to each other in French. I can't catch what they are saying, but they don't look happy.

The reserve isn't supposed to be open to visitors, and my first thought is they are up to no good. They could be big-game hunters or mixed up in the illegal wildlife trade.

I hear the metallic click of a gun being cocked. Through a wall of lacy leaves I see the gun being raised and pressed to the temple of one of the young guides. His friend begins to protest but is met with a backhanded crack to the cheek.

Suddenly, a loud pop fills the air, rousing a flock of rosy bee-eaters, their scarlet breasts bared as if in warning. One of the guides crumples to the ground, and the other cowers in terror. I stifle a scream. Smoke curls from the barrel of the gun.

It's barely 10 a.m., and little sunlight reaches my skin through the thick foliage, so I pray I'm invisible to the men. But even in the shade of towering African oaks, red cedar, and mahogany trees, the heat presses down on me. Sweat rolls down my temple and tickles my ear. The vegetation is thick and dense, and umbrella trees loom over me like thousands of lurking beasts.

The man with the gun yanks the surviving guide to his feet, and they move more deeply along the path into the forest. The man on the ground is still.

As a doctor of anthropology, specifically a primatologist, I've dedicated my life to watching, observing, recording the movements of bonobos. For science, I've given up my home country, romantic relationships, and motherhood. But recently I've grown weary of my research. Something else is calling to me, and though I'm not sure exactly what that is, I've decided to go back to home to the Midwest and teach anthropology to idealistic young scientists until I figure it out. I hope I make it back home. I have no doubt that the man with the gun would dispose of me just as easily as he did the young guide.

I want to go back to where the four seasons mark the passing of time. In the

fall I want to walk through piles of crisp jewel-colored leaves, and in the winter I want to wake up to a world enveloped in pristine white snow and a few months later wake up to robins on the lawn and crocuses peeking up through the newly thawed earth.

Today I'm supposed to be tracking Matthieu, a silly eight-year-old male who flirts unabashedly with the females in the reserve. My job is to observe and record what I see. Bonobos are known as the hippies of the primate world, living by the mantra of "make love, not war" and all that jazz. Unlike their close cousins, chimps and humans, bonobos do not kill their own.

As an infant, Matthieu was orphaned after his mother was killed for bushmeat and was found half-dead from starvation and grief. Matthieu was brought to Bone River Sanctuary, and he was lovingly nursed back to health by one of the Mamas, local women who become surrogate mothers to the orphans. Matthieu is one of our greatest success stories to date and one of our first bonobos released to live in the wildlife reserve not far from the sanctuary.

Of course I've seen the brutal, cruelty of nature. I have seen violent fights among the wildlife. But I've never witnessed anything as cold and calm as the way that man executed the young guide. This outright murder has made me sad and angry and even more ready to return home.

The men move slowly in my direction, and as they draw closer I can see that one of them looks vaguely familiar. He is barrel-chested, and his belly strains against the buttons of his khaki shirt. Wiry gray hair pokes out beneath his cap. His face is tanned and deeply creased, making it difficult to determine his age. I know I've seen him before, but I can't put my finger on who he is. The other man isn't familiar to me. He is tall, appears to be in his thirties, has a sharply angled face and close-set piercing eyes. Mean eyes. I would know if I'd ever seen those eyes before.

I lift the thirty-two-millimeter camera hanging around my neck and quickly snap several pictures of the men's faces. The click of the camera catches the younger man's attention, and his head jerks toward my hiding spot. I freeze. His mean eyes skim past me, and they start walking again.

I need to get to Dr. Ibori, the founder and director of Bone River. Dr. Ibori is the most intelligent man I've ever met and not just because he graduated from Université de Lubumbashi with a degree in psychology and then earned

a doctorate in veterinary medicine from Iowa State University and a second doctorate in anthropology from Oxford. Kendi Ibori understands people. A rare combination that I admire enormously—a scientific mind and an empathetic one, too. And he has tried to teach me all he could. I've learned so much about the care of bonobos from him, but I continue to struggle to learn all he knows about understanding people, as well.

I tuck my field notebook into my rucksack and begin the five-kilometer hike back to Bone River. I move slowly and quietly, keeping an ear out for any sound of the men. Though I've worked and lived in the Congo for going on ten years now and am ready to leave, I never tire of the beauty of its flora: *bauhinia galpinii* with its schoolhouse brick-red blooms, feathery meadows of *echinochloa*, bright green tufts of papyrus, medicinal *alchornea* berries drooping in graceful bunches.

Two kilometers in, my attention is drawn to a soft mewling sound, and I step off the well-worn path that takes me back to the sanctuary. Lying among rotting leaves and feathery ferns is the crumpled form of an adult female bonobo. She is lying in a fetal position, her arms protectively covering her chest. At first I think she's just resting, but as I look more carefully I see that her shoulders are rising and falling laboriously as if she's in respiratory distress.

I take a few steps closer to get a better look at her face. Typical of most bonobos, her black face is framed by a generous head of hair parted down the middle. Her wide nostrils and thin pink lips open and close as if trying to gather air.

What is not normal are the large patches of hair that are missing from her body. I don't recognize this bonobo. In fact, I know that I've never seen her in the reserve before. She blinks open her eyes and looks at me helplessly, her startingly amber-colored eyes filled with pain.

It seems counterintuitive, I know, but I don't go to assist her. The reserve is intended to be a safe place, free of poachers and hunters, for the bonobos to live as natural a life in the wild as possible. It does the species no good to have humans jumping in every time there is an injury or illness.

With great effort the bonobo shifts her body slightly, and to my surprise I see that her breasts are heavy with milk. But the bigger shock is the infant next to her who looks to be less than a year old. I can't imagine how they could have

appeared in the reserve with no fanfare. I guess the two could have wandered into the reserve on their own, but in all my time here that hasn't happened. Bonobos have moved away from this small colony, but none have emigrated in. Perhaps this is a sign that the Bone River project has succeeded, with the bonobos thriving and eager to search out new environments. Still, I have my doubts.

The infant complicates things, but only a little bit. I still don't believe I should intervene, but once I get back to the sanctuary and report the murder I will also tell Dr. Ibori about the ill bonobo. Perhaps he will dispatch a veterinarian to the site. I begin my retreat when the infant makes another desperate sound. I pause only momentarily and keep walking.

Again, a squawk. I turn back. The infant, a female, has ventured a few feet from her mother's arms. She's a tiny little thing and, like her mother, has bald patches covering her body. Strange. She reaches her long, narrow fingers out toward me as if beckoning me to come pick her up. She's not afraid of me, which could mean one of two things: She's never encountered a human before and doesn't know to be afraid, or she was rescued and has had consistent human contact.

The adult bonobo looks at me as I imagine only a frantic mother would. Pleading, begging. But for what? She gives her infant a feeble nudge toward me, but the baby scrambles back to the safety of her mother. Again she pushes the infant toward me. This time with more force. Is she asking me to take her baby? Remarkable.

I have to make a decision. The men could step into view any second now. I drop to my knees and hold out my arms. "Come here," I whisper in English. The infant looks back at her mother, who bares her teeth at her little one as if saying, "Don't you dare come back this way."

There's no more time. The men's voices are now coming back around and closer. I hesitate. I shouldn't intervene. It's not nature's way. Survival of the fittest and so on. I just need to get back to Bone River and alert the others to the situation.

I turn to leave when once again I hear male voices. "They went this way, I'm sure of it." The adult bonobo moans in what I can only describe as fear. I don't know what to do. They are coming closer.

“I know they were brought here,” the other male voice says. “I’ll be damned if she gets away with this.”

Without thinking, I sweep the infant into my arms and run.

“Hey!” a voice shouts. I’ve been seen. The infant clasps her thin arms around my neck and presses her nose against my throat. Her breath grazes against my skin in soft warm puffs.

“Hold on,” I whisper into the curve of her ear. I make an immediate decision and veer off the well-trodden path that will take us back to Bone River. The older man doesn’t look to be in the best of shape, and if I can get a good enough head start I can take the more direct, quicker route home.

I keep a protective hand on the infant’s head, blocking the sharp branches that strike us as I push past them, the thorny limbs lashing at my arms. I don’t dare waste time looking behind me. By taking this way, I’m shaving off about a kilometer, but I suddenly realize the futility of my plan. Of course, the remaining guide will know I’m from Bone River. Where else would a lone woman with a camera and a rucksack out in the middle of nowhere be from?

The closest village is more than fifteen kilometers away, and at any given time, the sanctuary serves as home to about a dozen scientists and researchers, and the guide would know this. Even if I get to the safety of the sanctuary ahead of them, they’ll know where to find me. I glance down at the infant, who smiles up at me. I know this isn’t a sign that she’s enjoying our little trek, but rather the grin, grimace really, is an indication that she is anxious. I frown back down at her. I know how she feels.

Bone River doesn’t have much in the way of security, a few guards who intermittently walk the perimeter of the thirty-square-kilometer facility, a few tree cameras mounted here and there, but I’ve never heard of anyone actually attacking any of the scientists or staff. Something very bad is going on in the reserve.

Though I’m in good physical shape, the afternoon heat and the uneven landscape are making my leg muscles burn. Sweat soaks my skin, making my grip on the infant precarious. I slow to a trot and turn and look back from where I’ve come. I don’t see anyone. Hopefully they’re long gone.

Breathing heavily, I bend at the waist, supporting the infant, who still has her arms around my neck in a death grip when the unmistakable crack of gunfire

explodes in my ears. I start running again, this time zigzagging between trees in case they still have me in their gun sights. My mind scrambles to come up with a hiding place. There are all kinds of nooks and crannies in the forest. Gutted-out tree trunks I could climb into, a fallen tree I could crawl beneath, pulling mammoth leaves over the top of us. I'm too afraid to stop, though. If I can only get to Bone River, we'll be safe.

Another gunshot echoes through the trees, this time not so close. I gradually slow my pace, trying to catch my breath. If they aren't shooting at me, who are they shooting at? The remaining guide? The bonobos? My legs feel rubbery, and despite the lightness of the infant, my arms ache, but this isn't the time to stop running for long.

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By the time I make it to the gates of Bone River Sanctuary, my clothing is soaked in sweat, I've lost my hat along the way, and my hair is plastered to my skull. With dismay, I realize that I've also lost my rucksack with my field notes and my camera. Ngongdu, the program manager who oversees the day-to-day operations of the sanctuary, stands at the gate. He squints into the intense sunlight as if trying to confirm what he is seeing. I must be a fright to look at. My arms and legs are dotted with blood where thorns and sharp branches have pierced my clothing and skin, I'm breathing heavily, and I look like I've taken a swim in the Monku'wa Mai. Then there's the infant bonobo I'm clutching to my breast.

"Dr. Jensen?" Ngongdu asks with concern as he unlatches the gate. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"A murder, in the reserve," I manage to say through hitching breaths. "Poachers, maybe," I say. "I don't know."

My appearance has alerted others. Several Mamas, the women who care for the rescued infant bonobos, rush out to join us. They each have at least one infant attached to a hip.

Delu, the Mama who has been here the longest, orders one of the newer caretakers to go and get me some water. Delu has told us she is in her eighties, but she looks much younger. She is lithe and has a serene presence that calms bonobos and humans alike. She, too, is holding an infant bonobo in her arms—Masikio, a year-old male with comically large ears, which is what his

name means in Congolese.

Someone presses a cup of water into my hands, but I can't drink. Not yet.

"Go inside," I plead. "It's not safe out here. Take the infants and go inside."

Ngondu speaks French, one of the official languages of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, into his walkie-talkie. He is ordering patrols to begin their rounds. Armed.

"Where is Dr. Ibori?" I ask, looking around helplessly. "I need to talk to Dr. Ibori."

Delu tells the other Mamas to return to the nursery. To me she says, "Come, let's go to the infirmary. Get the little one checked out." She nods at the infant, who, now that we've stopped moving, is shaking, her little limbs trembling with fright.

In a daze, I walk with her toward the infirmary, a concrete-block building where all the newly arrived bonobos are given a thorough exam and where all the ill primates receive medical care.

"I don't know her," Delu says. "She's not one of ours."

"I had to leave her mother in the forest. She's injured or sick. Had missing patches of fur. Just like this one."

"They wandered into the sanctuary?" Delu asks then shrugs. "Not totally unheard of, I guess. Female bonobos emigrate to find new troops, new homes." Delu is right. To avoid inbreeding, females often travel and join new groups of bonobos to mate and begin their families.

"Where is Dr. Ibori?" I ask again. "Is someone calling him? Telling him what's going on?"

"Ngondu will take care of it. Don't worry," Delu soothes.

Masikio twists in Delu's arms to get a better look at the infant in mine. The infant, traumatized by the morning's events, flinches and tries to make herself as small as possible. One of the staff veterinarians, Dr. VanHorn, a large imposing man in a white coat, approaches. The infant begins to squawk, and I can feel her heartbeat increase—a frantic tattoo thumping against my skin.

"Do you think it's the white coat?" Dr. VanHorn asks.

"That or because you're a man," Delu says. "I've seen it before." The vet wiggles out of his white jacket and tosses it aside and steps closer. The infant screams in protest.

“She’s going to have a heart attack,” I say, gently rubbing her back. I whisper into her ear, “It’s going to be okay.”

“I’ll go get Dr. Jakande,” Dr. VanHorn says with resignation.

“You’re thinking that she and her mother are victims of animal trading?” I ask Delu.

“Maybe that’s why she’s afraid of Dr. VanHorn,” Delu muses. “She had a bad experience with human males.” I try to reconcile this with what I saw in the forest. We’d both seen it many times. Bonobos rescued from some animal trade network and brought to Bone River or another sanctuary to recover and to hopefully be released back into the wild. Animal trading is a big-money business, so it’s not hard to comprehend that it could lead to murder.

Masikio is getting restless and shimmies down Delu’s torso and to the ground and begins to wander around the infirmary in search of something to play with. His eyes land on the shiny chest piece of a stethoscope lying over the back of a chair. He picks it up and cautiously puts it to his lips.

“No, no, Masikio,” Delu says, holding out her hand, and Masikio reluctantly hands the stethoscope to her as Dr. Jakande steps into the room.

“What do you have here?” she asks, peering at the infant. This time the infant doesn’t cry out in fear but snuggles in closer to me and regards Dr. Jakande warily.

“I found her in the forest,” I say and again tell my story about the murder, about finding the infant and her mother, the gunshots and racing back here. “I feel like I’ve seen one of the men before. But I’ve never seen this bonobo before, or her mother. Could they have been released into the sanctuary by another rescue organization?” I ask.

Dr. Jakande shakes her head. “Not without my knowledge. All rescues must go through an isolation period to ensure they carry no communicable diseases.” She lays a hand on Masikio’s head; he is now rifling through Dr. Jakande’s examination coat pocket in search of the treats she keeps there for the young bonobos. “In fact, you should really take Masikio out of here. No need to take any chances.”

Bonobos can carry the same illnesses that humans can: polio, measles, the common cold. All debilitating, possibly deadly.

Delu beckons to Masikio, and together the two leave the infirmary.

The infant clings tightly to me as Dr. Jakande does her initial examination.

“She looks to be close to nine months old but is small for her age. She may be a bit dehydrated but otherwise looks to be in adequate health. I’ll run her blood to make sure she doesn’t have any of the usual suspects: measles or polio.”

“What about the bald patches?” I ask. “Her mother had the same thing.”

“I’m not sure just yet,” Dr. Jakande says, bending down to get a closer look at the hairless areas on the infant’s back. “But I’ll figure it out. In the meantime, you look a little bit dehydrated, too. Why don’t you go back to your quarters and get cleaned up? I should be finished up by the time you get back.”

“Maybe later,” I say. “I want to find out if Ngongdu has learned anything about what’s going on in the forest. I’m sure that Delu will have assigned a Mama to her soon enough, and she’ll be over to check on her.”

“Oh, Mia.” Dr. Jakande gives a little laugh and glances down at the infant, who is gripping tightly to my shirt and watching my face carefully. “I think she’s already found her new Mama.”

I do my best to block out the infant’s cries as Dr. Jakande gently pries her little fingers from my shirt collar. As I leave the infirmary, Dr. Jakande calls after me, “She needs a name, Mia. What do you want to call her?”

I’m leaving the sanctuary tonight, and there’s no way I want to get attached to this little creature, so I give a dismissive wave and a chuckle. “I’ll leave the naming to you,” I say and step outside.

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Back in the blistering sunshine, the sanctuary is unusually quiet for a Monday morning. Except for several men standing guard at the gate; the others must have heeded my warning about the gunfire and made sure all the bonobos and their caretakers are inside until all is safe. I spend a few minutes searching for Ngongdu but learn he hasn’t come back from investigating the gunshots yet.

“Mia,” comes the unmistakable lilt of Dr. Ibori’s warm voice. I turn and suddenly he’s standing in front of me. “Mia, are you okay?” he asks, laying his hands on my shoulders. “You weren’t hurt?”

I want to lay my head on his chest and weep, but that wouldn’t be professional, so instead I pull away. “I’m fine. What’s happening?”

“This is not how you want to spend your last day here, I’m sure.” Dr. Ibori rubs a hand over his lips. “Ngongdu found the two guides you saw in the reserve. Both dead.”

“Both of them?” I cry out. “Why?” I ask. “Do you have any idea who those men are?”

“I have my ideas, but I don’t think I can prove it,” he says cryptically. “Not just yet.”

Suddenly I remember the rucksack that slipped from my shoulder in the forest. “My camera,” I say. “I dropped it when I was running. I may have gotten pictures of them.” I move toward the gate, but Dr. Ibori snags my elbow.

“Whoa,” he says. “You can’t go. Those men could be still out there.”

“But so is my camera, and if there’s a chance we can get it before they do, we can identify them.”

Dr. Ibori considers this for a moment and then raises Ngongdu on his radio to let him know that we are coming into the forest. There has been no sign of the men except for the two dead guides. Local law enforcement has been alerted and are en route as well, but the area is remote and their jurisdiction large. It could take hours before they arrive.

Dr. Ibori speaks with one of the guards, who hands him a shotgun. “Let’s stay close together,” Dr. Ibori says as we move into the shadow of the trees. I can’t help but feel at once both uneasy and comforted by the shotgun that Dr. Ibori now carries. He offers me one, too, but I decline. “We go find the camera and get out,” he says firmly.

I concentrate on the terrain in front of me, trying to remember the exact route I had taken earlier. The good thing is that while fleeing I managed to trample vegetation and break twigs, so I’m somewhat confident we’re on the right path.

We trudge forward through the thick mire of heat and humidity, and I’m getting discouraged. “I feel like we should have come upon them by now.”

“You were running, though, right?” Dr. Ibori asks, wiping sweat from his forehead. “You covered a lot more ground in a short amount of time.”

He’s right. I pick up my pace, but each pop of a branch or rustle of leaves makes me startle. Out of the corner of my eye, a dark figure ducks behind a

tree. My heart spasms in fear, and I stumble. Dr. Ibori is immediately at my side and steadies me. "It's okay," he says. "Look."

I follow his gaze. Peeking out from behind a coral tree, teeming with hummingbirds, is Matthieu, the adolescent male bonobo. I breathe a sigh of relief. At least he's okay. Matthieu scampers out from behind the tree and travels about thirty meters, then looks back to see if we are following him. Dr. Ibori and I exchange curious glances and follow Matthieu into the shadows. He takes us on a winding path through thick vines and cloying orchids. Foliage much denser than I remember. No wonder I'm so scratched up.

"There," I say recognizing the fallen tree. "That's where I left her." We rush over, and sure enough the adult female is still lying on her stomach, her breathing labored and her eyes glossy with pain.

"Mia, the camera," Dr. Ibori reminds me gently. "We'll see to her, but we have to find your camera."

I nod and reluctantly move away from the female. I find my rucksack a few yards away, but there's no sign of the camera. We scour the ground until once again Matthieu comes into view. He's cradling something small and black in his arms, and for a moment I think he's carrying a small bonobo. But no, it's my camera. He examines it intently and then begins to swing the camera by its strap.

"Matthieu," I call out, trying not to scare him away. I'm not naive enough to think that Matthieu will just meander over and hand me the camera. He may be comfortable around humans, but that doesn't mean he'll comply. I dig into my rucksack and pull out a small package of popcorn that I had tucked away for a snack. I show Matthieu the bag and toss out a handful onto the ground. Curiosity gets the better of him, and he walks over to investigate. He picks up a kernel and gives it an experimental lick. Finding the taste pleasing, he pops it into his mouth, then eats the rest. I hold the bag, and Matthieu, dragging the camera behind him, comes closer.

"It's all yours, Matthieu," I say. "Just give me the camera." Matthieu reaches for the bag and momentarily releases his grip on the camera, and Dr. Ibori swoops in and grabs it. I relinquish the bag of popcorn to Matthieu, and he toddles off into the forest.

I turn my attention back to Dr. Ibori, who is already looking through the

digital pictures I've taken. "Do you recognize anyone?"

He nods grimly. "I do." He points at the camera display. "This man here. Dr. Warren George. He studies communicable diseases in a laboratory in Kinshasa."

"Why is he all the way over here?" I ask.

"He experiments on animals. Primates. The treatment of his subjects isn't well regarded." Dr. Ibori looks over at the female bonobo struggling to breathe on the forest floor.

"I still don't understand," I say. "Is he poaching our bonobos to study, or is he bringing bonobos into the sanctuary?" The thought makes my blood run cold. Could Dr. George have brought bonobos infected with some disease into Bone River? Why, though?

"I don't know," Dr. Ibori admits. "But let's get her back to the sanctuary and see what we can find out." He sets the shotgun down on the ground, and we move to the female's side and kneel down. Dr. Ibori lays a large hand on her forehead. "Don't worry, Mother," he says. "We are here to help you." The female somehow seems to understand his words and doesn't struggle as together we carefully hoist her onto Dr. Ibori's shoulder.

This is when I notice him. Just off to the side of the female.

An infant bonobo. Covered in rotting leaves, and still. "Twins," I say in disbelief. "She had twins."

"Is it alive?" Dr. Ibori asks, stooping beneath the weight of the female.

I brush aside the leaves. "Barely," I say. "Male, approximately nine months, like his sister. We have to get both of them back to the infirmary."

I gently ease my fingers beneath the small creature when a loud crack erupts. I watch in horror as Dr. Ibori spins around from the force of the bullet and crashes to the ground along with the female bonobo. Blood is everywhere, though I can't tell if it's Dr. Ibori's or the bonobo's or both.

Without thinking, I scramble for the shotgun that Dr. Ibori laid on the ground. It's been decades since I've fired a gun. Not since I had gone pheasant hunting with my grandfather when I was twelve. But muscle memory is an amazing thing, and I aim and fire as soon as I spot the men. I pull the trigger, and the explosion fills my ears. Once, twice. That's all I need.

The man with the gun drops to the ground and clutches his thigh in pain. I

swing the gun back toward the older man, who raises his hands in front of his face as if warding off the bullets.

“Stay there,” I say. “Don’t move.” My words sound muffled, as if I’m under water, but they must have heard me because they both stay put.

Suddenly, I’m surrounded by a group of familiar faces. Ngongdu and a handful of other staff from Bone River have arrived.

“Are you hurt?” Ngongdu asks me.

“No, no,” I say and press the gun into his hands. “But Dr. Ibori.” I scramble over to where Dr. Ibori and the mother bonobo are sprawled in a pool of blood. Together Ngongdu and I turn Dr. Ibori over, and he stares sightlessly up at us. His shirt is drenched with blood and his chest is still.

I press my hands over the wound in hopes of stanching the blood flow, but I know it’s too late. My mentor is gone.

Ngongdu helps me to my feet. “Go with Victor,” he tells me kindly. “He’ll get you back to the sanctuary.”

“I don’t want to leave him,” I cry.

“I will stay with Dr. Ibori, don’t you worry. He will not be alone.”

I nod and allow Victor to lead me away. I glance back at the mother bonobo, lifeless and forgotten in the chaos. That’s when I remember the infant. I find the twin where I must have dropped him when I reached for the gun. He is shivering, and his dark eyes are wide with fear. I carefully lift him to my chest, and I turn back to follow Victor from the rain forest.

The other patrols are dealing with the men who shot Dr. Ibori. Both are on their bellies, hands behind their backs, guns trained on their heads. I must have only grazed the man I hit. Very little blood seeps from his leg. Part of me is relieved that I haven’t killed him, part of me wishes I would have.

Victor and I make the trek back to the sanctuary in silence. The infant clutches my index finger tightly with his little hand, and whenever he makes a sound I stroke his back and press him a little closer.

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Back at Bone River, we are met with a flutter of concerned staff. I can’t bring myself to tell them what has happened to Dr. Ibori. I’m ushered into the clinic, where Dr. Jakende is waiting for us. She takes in my blood-covered hands and the baby bonobo. “I’m fine,” I tell her, my voice breaking.

More than ever I want to leave this place. I want to go home and see my parents. I want to crawl into my childhood bed and pull the covers up over my head. I want to forget Bone River and the bonobos. Someone takes the infant from me and guides me to a chair. I sit, and Mama Delu presses a cold cloth to my face. She wipes Dr. Ibori's blood from my skin, all the while talking to me in soothing tones.

A telephone rings from the office area. I'm shaking even though the air in the clinic is hot. Someone tucks a blanket around my shoulders. Dr. Ibori is gone. He's really dead.

Ngongdu finally comes back and fills us in on what the police were able to get out of the two men, one of whom was Warren George, just as Dr. Ibori thought. An animal rights activist infiltrated Dr. George's laboratory. Seeing the horrific conditions the animals were enduring, she managed to smuggle the female bonobo and the two infants into the reserve and planned to go public when she had rescued as many other animals as she could.

"He's been crying for you," Dr. Jakende says as she gently lays the male infant in my arms. I'm crying, too. For Dr. Ibori, the guides, the animal rights activist, for the mother bonobo and her orphans.

Again the telephone rings, but no one moves to answer it. We are all listening intently to Ngongdu's account of what happened.

"When Dr. George found out about what the activist did, he wanted his 'patients' back—dead or alive—to destroy any evidence. The other man, a hired thug, panicked and shot the guides after they overheard the conversation of silencing the pretty scientist." Ngongdu glances my way. I guess I was the pretty scientist. Tears roll down my cheeks and land on the infant's face with a small splash.

"Money," Ngongdu says. "Dr. Ibori was murdered because Dr. George was making a lot of money on the drugs he was testing in his lab." Ngongdu shakes his head. "The body of the woman who infiltrated his research facility was found. She, too, was murdered."

I look up at the clock on the wall. I have to leave in the next few hours in order to catch my flights back to the States. But I'm a witness to murder, and I'm sure I'll have to delay my departure. In the coming week the university is expecting me to begin teaching at the outset of the new semester. They may

have to wait.

“What are we going to do now?” Ngondu asks. “What will happen to the bonobos? To us? Will we close down?”

“I’m sure that Dr. Ibori has made arrangements for the sanctuary beyond his death,” Dr. Jakende says. “There must be a trust or something.”

I hadn’t thought about this. Bone River is Dr. Ibori and Dr. Ibori is Bone River. One cannot survive without the other. I push the thought away.

Mentally, I make a list of what needs to happen next. I need to speak to the police and give my statement. I need to call the university. I need to let them know that they may need to make arrangements for someone to cover my classes until I arrive. Dr. Ibori’s funeral must be planned. That would fall to those of us who knew him best. He has no family beyond those of us at Bone River.

One of the vet techs is trying to feed the female infant while I am feeding the male infant. “She won’t eat,” the tech says in frustration. The female bats the bottle away and reaches for me.

The tech tucks her into my free arm, and I awkwardly take the bottle and tip it to her lips. It takes her a moment, but her thin, pink lips wrap around the latex nipple and her eyes widen in surprise and she begins to suck vigorously.

Dr. Jakende comes to my side and looks at me expectantly. “Have you come up with names yet?” she asks, and I smile up at her.

“His name is Abioye—’Son of Royalty,’” I say, thinking of the twins’ mother who died. “And her name is Ayana,” I whisper as Ayana’s eyes close sleepily. “That’s her name. ‘Beautiful Blossom.’”

“Lovely,” Dr. Jakende says.

Again the phone rings and rings. Mama Delu gets up to answer it. After a moment, she calls out, “It is someone asking for the person in charge.” The room grows quiet. No one speaks.

I set the now-empty bottles aside and carefully get to my feet. I hand Abioye to Dr. Jakende and Ayana to Ngondu. Mama Delu holds out the receiver to me, and I press it to my ear and listen. After a moment, I lower the phone to my side and turn to face my colleagues.

I won’t be going back home. Not tonight, not tomorrow. Maybe never, I think.

“The remainder of the bonobos at Dr. George’s research facility are going to be sent here,” I say. “We are going to have a full house of very ill bonobos, my friends. We have work to do. We have to prepare.”

# THE SENATOR'S WIFE

ALISHA KLAPHEKE

## One

The house-sized closet full of wool suits, strapless cocktail dresses, and kitten heels stares at me.

It is the worst kind of horror.

How did I—the art history grad student who valiantly battles a penchant for shoplifting art supplies—end up as a senator's wife? A snort escapes me. Because of David. *He's* how I landed here. Ten years ago, his mind was sharp enough to challenge my eager ideals, his ass was the best I'd ever seen, and he was the ticket away from my workaholic mother who never understood the word *weekend*.

I grab for the painfully sensible purse on the top shelf, my knuckles dragging against a forgotten book. Leaving the taupe nightmare of a purse where it is, I slide the heavy tome out of its hidden spot.

*Monet's Life at Giverny.*

The glossy cover reflects the closet's harsh lighting. This is a book that longs for beeswax candles and flea market lamps, so much the better for perusing the images of paintings, mills, and fading portraits of the artist himself. The book

was a gift from Mom on my eighteenth birthday. I really don't care to think about how long ago that was.

My diamond watch says it's time to dress for the stupid dinner party. I can't help but sigh. No one at the party, except Vivi and Rob, who are horrible, will want to talk to me. They never do. This book, however, has been waiting just for me. The pages slip through my fingers. They smell like my college library, like dust and faded perfume. Monet has always been my preferred artist. It's cliché at this point—every student on the far side of elementary school says the same—but I don't care. Monet loved the colors of the garden, river, and field. He struggled with his art, slogging through pits of lost inspiration only to soar to the heights of artistic confidence. An ache spreads through my chest and squeezes my heart. I never even tried to struggle with my art. I simply became David's wife and threw in the towel. Or brush.

I'm being an idiot. I can't help but believe Monet wants my attention, here and now.

I focus on one of the many paintings of the garden in front of Monet's home in Giverny. For some reason it isn't the sensuously colored flowers that tug at me. It's the beaten, dirt pathway between the rows of verdant growth. The heaped earth that once supported Monet's own feet.

What does that ground feel like? Is it soft? Does the earth there smell like my own sad little garden out back?

I press my hand to the image and breathe, wishing I could feel the air of France in my lungs. Would I soak in some of Monet's greatness, the enigma of him, if I stood in his footsteps? I like to think so.

Smiling, I turn the page and dive deeper into the world of art, a world away, a world my soul longs to breathe in.

A half hour of pale green waterlilies, deep azure ponds, and shadowed haystacks later, David walks into the closet wearing a tux and a face like a silent movie star. He doesn't raise an eyebrow or say a word. He just gives me that damned look, the one with the mouth tilt and the tightened jaw that clearly states: *You are exhaustingly disappointing to me.* It's too bad. He is really a fine-looking man with a sexy brain. But it isn't enough to forgive the way he picked apart my dreams over the years.

I shut the book and stand, enjoying the weight of Monet's life in my hands.

“Don’t give me that look. I’ll come down, David. No one will even notice I’m late.”

“You’re the hostess, Mia. They’ll notice.”

*They.* Not *I.* If it wasn’t for how it made him appear in front of the other politicians and social climbers, my husband wouldn’t care in the least if I came down for dinner or not. At least the truth doesn’t sting like it used to. Anything we had between us faded eight, no, nine years ago. I remember the exact moment I learned we weren’t Georgia O’Keefe and Alfred Stieglitz, that we were just two formerly infatuated people with very little in common.

Nine years ago, I asked, “We’ll take the later train home, all right?” It was the day I figured out the tragedy that was our relationship.

We were in New York City for a charity event and decided to spend the last of the trip in Central Park, him soaking up sun while I painted.

“The late train will be packed.” He sniffed one of my paints, then capped it. “There will be tourists all over. Let’s go now. We’ve had a great day.” Glancing at the light greens and deep browns of my canvas, he added, “Mia. You don’t seriously need another painting of trees and people, do you? You’ve never even sold one of your pieces. And it’s not like our back room isn’t full of them.”

And then he laughed.

It still makes me sick to remember the sound. Like it was plain silly to even consider worrying about the thing that made me happiest in life. That day, I left the painting in the park. Just left it there.

I haven’t painted since.

But it wasn’t the horrible things he’d said nor his condescending laugh that cinched the whole thing. It was the fact that we never fought about it. He never says a word about that day and neither do I.

Now, I consider returning the Monet book to its hiding spot, but instead I set it on the bench in the far-too-large closet’s center. “Henri won’t fail to impress the glittering masses.” David always makes sure our cook holds complete control in times like this. Wouldn’t want Mia sneaking in something interesting like, God forbid, a twenties-style cocktail in place of the boring-as-shit Chardonnay.

I slip off my loose sweater and don a frilly camisole I actually don’t hate

before getting into a dress I definitely do. My sling purse doesn't match at all, but I don't feel like switching out. I'll just tuck it away somewhere in the hallway.

David and I met at a gallery opening. I was studying the brushstrokes of a new artist out of Brooklyn when he slid up beside me, silent and smelling like a hotel pool. The chlorine was so strong, I coughed.

He hissed and grimaced. "Sorry. My nephew talked me into swimming at the Y to broaden my horizons. I didn't realize the experience would make me late to this and also repugnant to women."

The pool story worked, and I held out my hand to shake his. "I'm Mia. Art history fanatic with the nose of a bloodhound."

"That is unfortunate. Should I scurry away then? Or could I interest you in a lively discussion about why art is the only eternal industry in the history of our great world?"

That day, I asked him to stay. We spent the next week tangled in long talks, heated debates, and bouts of ferocious kissing.

We were two different people back then.

David returns from the master bath, adjusting his monogrammed gold cuff links. "Honestly, Mia. What is it with you?" His gaze roams over my dress. "Why can't you just quit trying to be something you aren't?"

My mouth opens and closes. "It's just a dress. It's not a statement."

"Didn't you buy something new last week?" He rifles through my side of the closet, his hair going askew.

"That was a scarf. And I bought it for *you*."

*One you'll never wear.* One I bought for the man I thought I'd married. The David I met at the gallery would've worn it to broaden his horizons. Where did that David go?

Anger and disappointment roll through me in successive waves.

I point at his tux. "Can't say I'm thrilled with *your* duds. Black again? How droll."

The David from the art gallery would make a joke here or twist my phrase into an interesting question. Now his arguments are simply that. Arguments.

I turn from his confused face and head out of our room and down the wide, curving stairs, admiring the glittering patterns the chandelier paints on the

wall. I could study the rainbow array of light all night, but I have guests to greet. Guests I didn't invite. These people with their political gossip and backstabbing ways aren't my friends. No, I left my friends when I linked up with whip-smart David. Well, I wanted a challenge, and I got one. But living a challenge from day to day is so vastly different from enjoying a challenge on a date once a week. It's exhausting and sad.

I should've left for Mexico last week. Yes, Mexico. It would've made this evening and Monet that much easier to handle. On Wednesday, I had this wild moment on my way to a mammogram—the glamorous forty-year-old's life—and the airport's exit shouted at me. It was so big and green, and it just tugged all of my attention off the road ahead of me.

Suddenly, my hands turned the wheel, my foot shoved the gas pedal, and I found myself standing at the Delta kiosk, dreaming of margaritas, sand between my toes, and a nice little sunburn. But I had no passport with me that day. The real world sliced through my dream of an unplanned vacation.

Shaking my head at myself, I left the busy airport behind a van of church kids who probably still had dreams they thought would actually come true. As I drove to my appointment and prepped for the severe scowl I would get from the nurse because I was very late, my mind whirled at what I'd almost done. I almost left for another country without even telling David.

The second I got home, I went straight to my jewelry drawer, found my passport, and stowed it in my purse. Of course, I wasn't going to Mexico. I didn't even really want to go to Mexico. But I loved the idea that I *could* go, and go far, if I really needed to.

David whisks past me on the stairs, unaware of the trip I almost took or what is simmering inside my brain. He doesn't pause to take my arm like he used to. One hand smooths his hair and the other checks his phone.

I honestly would love a good fight with him.

Right now.

Not just an argument. A fight to shake this thing up, to change something. Perhaps I could start in on him right after the appetizers. A good left hook. That would be amusing. I laugh to myself, imagining David's shocked face.

He rounds the corner, his voice booming a *Welcome!* into the parlor.

I trail him, a shadow of the woman he married.

## Two

“Mia! We are so glad you invited us.” Dressed in an ebony suit with a deep V-neck, Viviane Hausman extends a manicured set of long fingers in my general direction.

I’m not sure which is louder, her voice or the irony behind her warm greeting. The woman knows very well I had nothing to do with who was invited to this party. Or any party. She is David’s PR person, and she sends out every invitation to every event at our house. She also happens to be unhappily married to a Supreme Court judge. I’m completely sure David thought we should be best pals simply because of our shared affinity toward animals. Never mind I like sketching wild horses out west and she bets on the brightest at the races. It has nothing at all to do with her husband and his position. Definitely not.

“Good evening, Vivi.” I take the glass of gross Chardonnay she’s offering, then sip it. My tongue cringes, but I take a second gulp. “How has your week been?”

“Pathetic,” she says.

“Do tell.”

“I had everything arranged. The right hotel. The parties. We were supposed to go to the Preakness.” She drinks half of her glass of wine. “Instead, I had to dine with a diplomat from some country no one has ever heard of.”

I smile. “We can’t always get what we want.”

Her gaze flattens. “Please don’t tell me you’re quoting the Rolling Stones at a dinner party.”

Making a zipping motion over my lips, I leave Vivi and grab a shrimp from one of the many silver trays set around the painfully beige room. Beige is fine. Beige is great. Why can’t I just like beige? Because beige sucks. Yes. I am an asshole. Pretentious and judgmental as the rest of them. There is no doubt I’m the square peg in this round hole.

Everyone around me talks politics for what feels like two hundred years. They’re all laughing politely and doing all the right things. David’s grin is real. I remember that grin. It used to appear when I entered a room. That feels like a dream from someone else’s life.

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We were happy for a while. For the first year of our marriage, I taught a watercolor class to the kids at an after-school program down the road. Afterward, David and I met for drinks. Every Thursday. It seemed like a new tradition I could count on. Sometimes we did shots and watched a hockey game. Sadly, the next day was always full of David explaining why we wouldn't be able to do that ever again if he was going to make it to the top. I laughed. The top of what, was my question. To me, enjoying a night out with a man smarter than most and cute as hell was pretty pinnacle.

Another voice, this one coming from Rob, Vivi's husband, sounds over my shoulder and shoves the memories away. "Mia Dufraine. You look lovely tonight."

Quickly swallowing my shrimp instead of savoring it like I want to, I face the judge. I feel off-center, like a crooked painting hanging a bit too far to the left. Judge Rob is a contradiction. He looks about one hundred years old, but he moves and speaks like a man my own age. I fidget with my wedding ring. The skin underneath always itches.

"Thank you, Rob. How are your kids these days?"

His two eldest are firmly established in Washington. I haven't heard anything about the youngest in a while. Vivi told me he'd switched majors for the ninth time. I ran into him—Hensley was his name—at a bar downtown once. He was just barely old enough to be in the place, but he seemed at home with friends at his elbows and a good bourbon in his hand. We talked for a few about the dog painting on the wall above the pool table. I laughed hard at his joke about the similarities between a bar's displayed artwork and its patrons' cologne intensity.

Rob's jaw tightens. "Hensley is a bit of a...firecracker."

"I gathered that from the jumping-into-the-pool-off-the-balcony story Vivi told me." Hensley was definitely the only person in their family that I could conceivably talk to without hating every single second of the conversation.

"I wish Vivi wouldn't indulge him. She does, you know. Gave him plane tickets to California. Said he needed a vacation to set his mind right."

"Maybe Vivi is on to something."

Rob's eyes flash. Judges, from my experience, only enjoy complete and total admiration and obedience from us lesser folk. "She is not. He'll be out there

doing yoga or God knows what. Smoking weed and being a waste of space. He'd better learn to listen to his father, or he'll find himself without the funds to pay for that apartment he so enjoys."

"So you're bribing him to do what you want him to?"

"I will rein him in." Rob starts off angry, but his face smooths, and he settles on a simpering smile that turns my stomach. "For his own good."

"Good luck with that." I down the wine and grab another shrimp.

"You don't understand. You don't have children. I sent him money to pay for everything he needs, and he hasn't even cashed it. I wouldn't be surprised if he wrecked his car just for attention."

A crash echoes from the kitchen.

David immediately apologizes for the racket. "Our chef must be drumming up something truly amazing in there." His smile is awkward, and I wish he'd grow some balls and not worry so much about impressing everyone. Especially this bunch of crooks and liars.

I joke about David's crew, but really, I shouldn't. It isn't a laughing matter. They are truly foul representations of humankind. I know for a fact the congressman smoking the cigar next to Vivi had a man falsely accused of laundering money just to get his name off the next ballot. And I'm almost certain Vivi herself was involved in Susan's suicide five years back. Journalists don't last long when they don't color within Vivi and Rob's lines. David hasn't committed any crimes with his own hands. But he certainly isn't innocent. He held back information during the investigation into Susan's death, for one. I'm not sure what he knows, but he definitely has more damning information on Rob's activities during that week than he lets on. There is no way he remains clueless.

This is a room of criminals pretending to be the good guys, and it turns my stomach. If I brought it up to David, he'd laugh. He'd say I was being ridiculous and I had some kind of conspiracy complex. The phone number to his shrink would show up on my nightstand. I'd bet on it.

A second, louder crash sounds from the kitchen.

"I'll take care of it." I hope Henri and his minions are okay in there. I head toward the kitchen's white door beyond the stretch of this room and the next, glad for a reason to get away from Rob.

As my hand touches the door, Vivi's voice leaks into my ears, barely audible from the other room. "Watch out, David. Your introverted other half might just decide to stay in there all night."

I freeze, waiting for David's response. Will he argue that? Will he make a joke? What does he want—for me to stay or for me to disappear? A memory of his pool smell and laugh the night we met drags over my mind. My heart quivers, and I hate that a tiny part of me still cares.

His words blend like paint on bad paper. "She is a senator's wife. She knows how to handle herself."

A senator's wife. That's all I am. Not an artist. Not a woman with her own goals. Not a person at all. I'm simply David's wife in David's house in David's life.

A life I hate.

I study my hand, pressed against the kitchen door. Clean nails and a big diamond ring. It isn't the ring David talked about when we grew serious about our relationship and started talking about engagement. He mentioned his great-grandmother's ring, the one with the small ruby and the silver scrollwork. No, a store-bought ring better suited a senator's wife, so that's the ring choking my manicured finger. I'd be so much happier if garden dirt darkened my cuticles and bits of bright green paint colored the place where the hulking diamond sits. I've become someone I don't like and don't know.

A curious feeling uncurls in my chest. I have no name for it. Not yet.

### **Three**

The scent of sweet onions bubbling in butter welcomes me into the kitchen and does its level best to push David's words from my head.

"Everyone okay in here?"

"Just a little butterfingers," Henri says, laughing. "All is well, Madame."

A puddle of that onion wonderfulness glistens around the island's wooden legs, near a fallen skillet. Henri and two of his assistants wipe the floor with large blue washcloths I didn't even know we owned.

"Need another hand?" I nab one of the cloths and bend to begin cleaning.

Henri touches my arm gently. His eyes are soft and kind. It's not a come-on. It's just nice. "No, no, no, Madame. We have it under control. You go enjoy your party."

“All right. But I am good for more than just standing around drinking wine.”

“Oh, I know, I know. You should share your talent with the world, Madame. Why don’t you teach those art classes anymore?”

My cheeks go red as Henri’s minions incline their heads to listen in.

“Too many charity events and dinners. I don’t have the time.” That isn’t the real reason. David didn’t like it. Little by little, he painted those Thursdays black with scheduled soirées, meetings, and anything he deemed a step toward that mysterious “top” he droned on about.

Henri nods. “*Bien sûr*. You are an important part of the senator’s team, *oui?*”

I close my eyes, wishing I was anything but.

A shout punches through the partially open window near the side door.

Setting the cloth on the marble countertop, I go to see what’s happening in the driveway. David’s driveway. I’d never choose such an entrance—a giant fountain and two sweeping lanes lined in flowering bushes. I prefer stone drives and ancient oaks.

Another shout and raised voices tell me the excitement isn’t from a trust fund kid buzzing past the house on a new motorcycle.

Outside, Hensley argues with a person standing on my front steps, behind the columns. “No, Dad,” he says. “I’m not going back.”

Speak of the devil.

“Madame?” Henri’s voice calls over the noise. “Should I call the police?”

“No. It’s not an emergency.” I hope.

Rob huffs from the steps. “You should be taking your finance exam, Hensley. Didn’t your professor already give you an extension? You’re going to ruin everything. The internship. The job. All of it. When will you stop throwing your life away?”

Rob’s face glows bright red under his mop of white hair. He drops off the last step and walks toward Hensley like the boy’s a bomb that might go off.

Hensley chucks an envelope at Rob’s shiny shoes. “I don’t want this. I’m done.”

The curious feeling that recently grew around my heart perks up, making me feel a little dizzy and strangely happy. What is going on with me? I grip the purse I still haven’t set down tighter to me. Am I having a stroke?

Rob picks up the envelope and examines the contents: a thick stack of \$100

bills. His brow wrinkles. “This is for your rent. Your books. You—”

“No, Dad. I’m leaving.”

“And just where do you think you’re going?”

“I only came to give that back.” Hensley points to the envelope. “Sorry. I’m not who you think I am. This”—he waves his hands at the ridiculous fountain—“isn’t my life. It isn’t what I choose.”

“You don’t get to choose until you are the one paying the bills, son. Now, stop being an idiot and come inside.”

And then I’m out the side door and standing in the driveway. The curious feeling pulls me toward Hensley’s car.

“Are you going to the airport?” I ask Hensley. I touch my purse, feeling the outline of my wallet, keys, and that beloved, freedom-giving passport.

Suddenly, I know exactly what I want.

Cafés full of small dogs and ripe conversation. A countryside bursting with growth that inspired so many artists. A land heavy with the history of expression through visual demonstration.

I want France.

Hensley frowns, confused. “Uh. Yeah. Need a ride?” He glances at the house, surely looking to see if David is about to storm out and tear him a new one.

Rob stutters something unintelligible.

I turn to glare at the judge. “I’m not running off with your son, Rob. I’m going to France. To Giverny. It’s where Monet lived a lot of his life. This”—I copy Hensley and wave my hands at the stupid fountain—“isn’t my life either. Tell David I’ll call him. Maybe.”

Did I just say that? Did I just throw away my marriage, my house, this life? My head feels like it’s full of feathers.

The curious feeling inside me is joy. Freedom. It’s me busting out of this prison I’ve been in for far too long.

Hensley opens the passenger-side door, and I climb in as Rob creates new swear words on the front steps. The car seats are chilly, but Hensley’s smile reminds me of Henri’s—simple, kind, not meaning more than it should.

As his phone rings, unanswered, he peels out. “So, you’re tired of being someone else, too?” he asks.

“Yes. I believe I am.”

“Who do you want to be?”

An artist. A woman who smiles. “Myself.”

He nods and turns on some wild violin music. “Love it.”

The night air pours in through the windows, and I breathe it in. Rob keeps calling, and Hensley silences his ringer. We’re at the airport before I realize my own phone is on the charger in my room.

I may never bother to get a new one.

*C’est la vie.*

## **Four**

The Giverny breeze smells like the color green. I leave the tiny tour bus and trail my fellow artists toward the spot we paid to visit. Monet’s home. We will paint here today, in this very special spot, and it will be the best check on my bucket list yet.

I’ve been in France for three weeks now. I have zero regrets. My flat is nothing to crow about, but it’s my own and it’s covered in paint. The kitchen is blue, the living room/bedroom is deep purple, and the bathroom is full-on metallic gold. There isn’t a glass of wine in the place. I have a lime tree in the window and three cheap cocktail mixes near my never-ending supply of croissants. My newly adopted cat possesses the proper amount of French disdain.

I paint every single day.

The tree limbs creak above my head as I unpack my paints, along with the small group of other painters. My new phone rings, and my heart goes a little cold.

It’s David.

We spoke briefly before hiring lawyers to do the rest. This call is unplanned, and I’m tempted not to answer.

Heading toward a sunny spot by an old farmhouse, I click the phone and hold my breath.

“Hello.”

“I’m sorry.”

I can’t speak.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to say anything. I just...I wanted to tell you that

I get it. We changed. It wasn't the life you wanted. If you think you might come back—”

“David.” My heart clenches. I'm not regretful, but I am a bit sad. We could've been great.

“I know. I know.” David's voice is quiet.

“I bet you'll make it to the top without me weighing you down.”

David's laugh is weak. “Maybe. Hey.”

“Yes?”

“I loved you. I did.”

And the final piece of us falls into memory. “I know.”

“Call me if you need anything.”

And my heart warms at that. Finally. This is honesty, and I can't hate him when he's being a good person. “Thank you. I will. Same for you.”

I click the phone off and walk through the damp grass back to my paints and my new friends. I almost want to cry. It's a strange feeling. Sadness and happiness in one. I thought there was only loving someone or not loving someone. I didn't know there could be an in-between. I did love David. And I will hold those memories of love inside me while I grow this new life across the ocean.

I smile so wide that my cheeks ache. It's a better ache than the one my heart suffered in David's life. A happy ache. My brush sweeps across the canvas, and I glance in the direction of Monet's house. With the river gurgling and the sun filtering through the leaves, I fully understand why Monet picked this place above all others.

Setting my brush down, I wander into the garden in front of Monet's ivy-covered home. Flowers burst from the turned soil like purple flames, and I stroll through their head-high blooms. Birds flutter in the mature trees that guard this special place. The scent of sun-warmed earth rises, and I stop, look down.

My toes wiggle at the ends of my sandals.

I'm standing where Claude Monet stood.

I am in his footsteps, breathing the air he breathed. The earth here is exactly as strong and soft, rich and gorgeous, as I imagined it to be when I saw this place in the book. My lungs pull the air inside and my soul lifts, soaring.

No more parties with criminals. I never have to sit through a charity event filled with fake grins. My life is finished with giant jewelry, David as the first concern, and friends who really aren't friends at all.

Now my life is gardens, paint, cats, and raw honesty.

Hugging my arms, I take another deep breath of the earth and the flowers and the history of this new church of mine.

I am finally home. I am finally myself. And this is the best kind of joy.

# THE PROFESSOR

LAURA BENEDICT

I'VE NEVER BEEN SO HAPPY to wake up and realize it's Monday. After a weekend full of too many questions asked and unanswered, and too little sleep, I'm ready for a new start. In fact, I feel so energized that I write the first three pages of a new chapter from my next book right after breakfast. Then, with a last, skeptical look at the black velvet box sitting between the salt-and-pepper shakers on my kitchen table, I grab my laptop bag and travel mug of coffee, and head out the front door.

Kelly, my across-the-street neighbor, is already in her elderly Dodge minivan, idling at the curb. Firing up my Jeep, I pull out of the driveway to follow her to Sisters of St. Mary of the Cross Women's College, where we both teach. As we climb out of our valley, the roads steepen, and I sip my coffee carefully to keep it from spilling on my mostly clean linen dress. On Mondays I have the 254 writing workshop, and office hours in the afternoon, but today I have more than students on my mind. The rich October colors of the trees we pass are just so much background to the image of the delicate diamond solitaire in the velvet box. Before I slip completely into my own thoughts, a sharp *plink* on the Jeep's windshield grabs my attention. I automatically scan the glass for a spreading crack, but then have to brake hard

because I realize I'm suddenly right up on Kelly's bumper, who's slowed her van to a crawl. Letting fly a curse word that would fry the ears off the good Sisters of St. Mary of the Cross, I ease the Jeep to the left to see if there's traffic ahead. Nothing. Kelly puts an arm out her window and gestures wildly. I look up. There, running nearly the length of the rust-streaked surface of the town's only overpass, is my name, spray-painted in black letters:

## Mia Jensen Is A Harlot

It takes me a few seconds to understand exactly what I'm looking at, to attach the name on the overpass to myself. Can there possibly be another Mia Jensen in town that I haven't heard of? In a freakish flash of self-protection, the English major part of my brain steers my attention away from the message's meaning. It notes that my name is spelled correctly, as is the word *harlot*. Altogether it's a good, clear sentence: subject = Mia Jensen; predicate = *is a harlot*; verb = *is*, noun = *harlot*. *Mia Jensen is a harlot*. It's the kind of short, declarative sentence I encourage my creative writing students to construct. Except not a single one of them would think to use the word *harlot*.

Kelly pulls the minivan onto the road's narrow shoulder, and I park behind her, staring up at the overpass. Someone with a can of paint thinks I'm a sixteenth-century slut? *No*. Someone wants to embarrass me or humiliate me. A flush warms my neck, rising to my cheeks, and I feel the tips of my ears begin to burn. But I take a deep, meditative breath and close my eyes to let it wash over me in a bright red wave. The flush sails off on an imaginary tide, and I decide I can let the shame and embarrassment go.

*Nope. I'm not going to let this freak me out. It doesn't matter where it came from.*

Kelly's brisk knock on the window makes me jump. Her face is an exaggerated mask of shock and indignation.

I burst out laughing.

"What's wrong with you?" Kelly's muted voice is distant, as though rising through water. "Can't you see it?"

I bite my lip once I'm out of the Jeep. She's genuinely upset, and I'm grateful that she cares so much.

"Mia, this is a nightmare. Who would do that?"

The words on the overpass appear taller, more real without the windshield in the way. “You know,” I say, shielding my eyes from the morning sky. “It’s kind of amazing, really. I mean, wow. They must’ve worked awfully fast not to get caught.”

“Don’t act like this doesn’t bother you.” Kelly tugs at my arm so I’ll look at her. Her hazel eyes are sincere. Concerned. It’s nice to have a caring friend like Kelly. At thirty-five, she’s like the slightly older sister I never had. That doesn’t mean I tell her everything.

“But it *doesn’t* bother me. Why should it?” Okay. Maybe there’s still a tiny ember of anger left in me about it, but I’m of the fake-it-till-you-feel-it school of emotion management.

Cars pass us without slowing. Even if the people inside had never heard the name Mia Jensen before they got out of bed this morning, they know it now. Except they, like Kelly, don’t have any idea that Mia Jensen, the unmarried, blond, rumpled creative writing professor standing on the side of the road, has a four-and-a-half-month baby bump hidden beneath her baggy linen dress.



On campus, Kelly and I park our vehicles side by side, and walk toward the cluster of brick buildings overlooking the hazy Virginia valley where our little town of eight thousand people rests. She’s encouraging me to phone the police and the county highway office to get the overpass cleaned up. I do my best to listen, but the coffee made me queasy, and the anticipation of having to explain who I am, and describing that stupid graffiti to the authorities, is making it worse. Maybe I just won’t call them. Surely some government person will eventually decide it needs to be cleaned up. Kelly continues our (mostly one-sided) conversation until one of her twins calls from the school bus to complain about the food Kelly packed in his lunch. “Just eat the damn lunch, Trevor!” Then, “Wait, I’m sorry I cursed at you...” We reach the junction of sidewalks that will take us to our respective buildings, and I give her a quick wave, turning away before she can get off the phone.

The leafy quad is quiet, except for squirrels and a few noisy birds. It’s early enough that the students are either just rolling out of bed or are at breakfast in the dining hall, so Kelly’s retreating form is the only one in sight. But the overpass crosses the very road that leads up the mountain to both the school

and a stretch of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Anyone who arrived on campus this morning will have seen it. Also, it's Monday, and the graffiti might have been there all weekend. *Everyone* on campus might have heard by now, and my students aren't subtle. I'll know if I'm wearing my scarlet letter as soon as I hit the classroom.

At the entrance to the humanities building, I pause to kiss two fingers and touch them softly to the bronze plaque beside the door.

*Sister Mary Paul, 1931–2011, Believer in the Word, Beloved of God, Beloved of Us All.*

It was Sister Mary Paul who hired me to teach writing here, and then supported me in my failed full-professor bid. She was a smart, unsuperstitious woman who hadn't blinked when she learned my only published book was a middle-grade novel about a girl who discovers she's inherited supernatural powers from a hapless aunt who everyone thought was crazy but was really a good witch. I miss the gentle nun every day, and count myself lucky that certain parties haven't resumed trying to get rid of me because they think I'm a Satan worshipper.

What would Sister Mary Paul have done when she heard about the graffiti? I imagine her watching me carefully as she passed me the cut-glass bowl brimming with Hershey Kisses she kept on her desk. "Tell me how I can help," she might say. No judgment. No jumping to conclusions.

Except she's been gone well over a year, and the issue of the graffiti pales in comparison to the notion of having an unmarried, pregnant teacher in front of a class of impressionable young women. (*Impressionable Young Women* sounds like a band name, doesn't it?) I know it seems ridiculously old-fashioned, but that's the thinking here among the ancient nuns and the lay administration. Maintaining an image of upstanding morality is a big deal for them, especially because this particular college has become a haven for complicated, creative, insecure young women who are fearful of the world at large. Privileged young women whose families want them sheltered and protected.

I unlock my office door and close it behind me once I'm inside. You're probably expecting me to tell you how stuffy and small and hot it is, with scratched wood furniture, a dented file cabinet, and windows that were painted shut years ago. The few remaining single-sex colleges in the country

do suffer with miserable budgets. But my office is spacious and light and cool, with newish windows, a view of a neighboring mountain, and built-in everything, including a nook for a tiny, humming refrigerator. It's the perfect office for a writer/professor, with one small exception: Too many people have keys to get inside.

Two notes lie on my desk chair. One is a single fold of creamy ivory stationery, an invitation (read: an order) from Mother Mary Joseph to have tea with her at 2 p.m. The second is scrawled on a ragged sheet of lined paper torn from one of my open notebooks. It's signed C., for Carlo, and asks me to call or text him. He has used three exclamation marks.

The notes are not unrelated.

I won't hold you in suspense about Carlo. Or my pregnancy. Carlo is the father of the baby girl somersaulting in my womb. I haven't seen an ultrasound yet, but I'm 99 percent sure the baby is a girl, which will disprove a theory I once heard that intelligent men are more likely to father girls. Carlo is no genius.

Carlo is a brilliant groundskeeper, and a very sweet man. He knows plants and planting tools, and he has a great eye for symmetry. In fact, he's kind of a symmetry junkie and once pointed out to me that my right eye sits just a smidge lower than my left eye. Of course I've known forever about the difference in the way my eyes are, and, frankly, find it a little embarrassing. It was rude of him to mention it, but we were both a little drunk, and it didn't keep me from having sex with him, again. And again.

I call Mother Mary Joseph's secretary to let her know I accept the invitation to tea. Hanging up, I give my wrinkled dress and scuffed navy flats a despondent look. I usually dress more carefully for run-ins with Mother Mary Joseph, but who knew the whole *harlot* thing was going to happen?

Carlo can wait.

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No one is late for my 254 writing workshop today, and I can tell by their smirks that the word about the graffiti is out. My guess is that they only find it interesting for the entertainment value. Their faux sophistication won't let them feel anything like empathy. How funny that the nuns and administration are worried about them being scarred by their teachers' immorality. If they

only knew how savvy the students were, or at least imagined themselves to be.

“I bet you thought I was only famous for my books,” I say, laying my folder with the day’s manuscripts on the desk. The famous part is a joke, of course. I make tidy royalties on my *Giselle’s Spells* series, but I’m not big on the whole promotion thing. In my author photo I’m a concoction of hair and makeup and leather that I barely recognize, so it’s not like my young readers would know who I am if they saw me, anyway.

The girls titter like middle-schoolers, and I smile at them but don’t volunteer anything else. It’s my own business, right?

The workshop goes well, except for one uncomfortable story about a girl whose sister runs away with the Turkish Muslim gardener who works on their family’s estate in the English Cotswolds. The sister goes to Turkey thinking she will be a spy against IS and becomes deeply disillusioned when she discovers that her lover is not a militant as he told her but from a family of fig farmers. And she’s meant to work with him on the farm after they marry.

The other students love the story and laugh a lot. In fact, while we have to discuss its many issues, including cultural stereotyping and a huge number of the comma splices I constantly rail against, the story is far and away better than the navel-gazing self-portraits that most of them turn in every few weeks.

I’m the one who’s uncomfortable. Do they—or at least the writer—know about Carlo and me, or is the story a coincidence? They *could* have spray-painted the overpass as a prank, if they do know about our affair.

We all startle when a terrible grinding, whining noise erupts outside. It’s as though some machine is trying to eat the building’s brick. Several of the girls rise from their chairs, but I’m up faster.

“Everyone sit down. I’ll look.”

I hope it’s my imagination, but do I catch a couple of side-eyes on my way to the window?

Looking down, I see Carlo, seated on some small machine with long metal tines half-buried in the dirt. Two bushes lie nearby, their root balls wrapped in knotty brown burlap. The grinding continues for a moment but stops when Carlo pushes back his sweat-darkened red cap back on his head and looks up at me.

“For Christ’s sake,” I whisper. “Why?”

“Is everything okay, Professor Jensen?”

I guess my whispering isn't whispery enough.

I don't turn around. “Everything's fine, Heather. They're planting bushes.” Below me, Carlo waves and makes a *call me* gesture with one hand. Then he blows me a kiss.

Dear God, what have I gotten myself into?

Carlo looks like a sculpted Roman god. While his hawkish nose and small eyes keep him from being conventionally handsome, everything else about him is pretty much perfect. Believe me, I know. His hands are rough, but every other bit of his olive skin is sensually, kissably soft. (Forget that old stereotype of hairy Italian men!) While he could delegate a lot of his manual labor to others, Carlo savors inhabiting his muscular body, likes that he's built it up naturally, and not just in the gym. He loves being outdoors. Loves nature. And so much about him is proportional. Symmetrical. Even the cheeks of his butt match each other exactly.

When he came to the college from Italy two years ago, there was some discussion of nepotism because Mother Mary Joseph is his aunt. But he was highly qualified, spoke beautiful English, and, of course, was Roman Catholic. That suited the administration just fine.

Not that Carlo is so religious that he worries about breaking the adultery commandment. There were rumors right away that he was involved with the engaged chair of the horticulture department, but she denied it vociferously to several of us at a local bar after a faculty dinner. “Not that, you know, I wouldn't be interested. Well, if it weren't against the rules, of course.” Then she blushed like a virgin bride.

Whatever sexual adventures Carlo was having then, he wisely kept them off campus, despite the many students who flirted, shyly or bold as you please, whenever they ran into him.

Not having strict religious scruples myself, and finding him very, very attractive, last spring I started making up reasons to go to the grounds offices to ask his advice about my own garden. He answered my questions. And then he offered to come by my house and assist me in my garden. And that was that. Maybe I was vulnerable because I was still grieving Sister Mary Paul's death, or maybe because it had been a year since I'd last had sex with anything

that didn't have batteries and live in my bedside table drawer. It doesn't matter. Here we are.

I give Carlo the slightest of nods but don't wave back. I already know why he wants to talk to me. It has to do with the gold ring, with its small but flawless diamond, that he insisted I keep on Friday night.

"Think about it, *cara mia*." He set the box on the kitchen table. I stared down at it for a moment and looked back at him. His deep brown eyes were sincere, but I knew they could shine with mischief in a split second. Or harden with intention whenever he put a hand to my cheek or lightly stroked my breast.

Carlo is a wonderful lover, and would no doubt be a fun and generous father. He *will* be a fun and generous father. But I don't love him. And I know that if I married him it would only be out of a sense of duty. Perhaps old-fashioned propriety. I've been reading articles on how important it is for a child to have married parents. Also articles that say that as long as the child feels loved, they'll be just fine in a one-parent home. Except I don't want to be married to him. It's not that I think I'm above being a gardener's wife. It's that I can't see us together in five years. Ten. Forty? We have so little in common besides sex and the baby. I don't love him. No child should have to grow up in a home without love.

Before I turn back to the classroom, I rest one hand on the taut, shallow oval of my belly.

*I want to give you everything you need.* My thoughts reach for the baby's thoughts. This is the only time in our lives when we can communicate absolutely without prejudice, without possible misunderstandings between us. We are one body.

I breathe, waiting for an answer. Behind me, the dozen girls are waiting, too.

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By lunchtime, Kelly has left me three texts. I avoid the dining hall so I won't run into her—or anyone else. My lunch is a cup of yogurt and two mandarin oranges from my office fridge. Oh, and a Baby Ruth bar. It's cheap chocolate, but it has peanuts for extra protein, right? These days, no matter how tense or busy I am, I make myself eat. When I was a kid I remember people on television patronizing women who were supposedly pregnant, saying, "I see

you're eating for two!" I've always thought it was kind of a dig, as though pregnant women just wanted an excuse for pigging out. There are few things I hate more than being judged or condescended to. But I've never been great about eating a healthy diet, and I don't want to screw the baby up, too. Plus, I'll need all my strength for later in the afternoon.

With a free hour before I have to go to my 2 p.m. ~~seolding~~ tea date, I put a note on my door to indicate that my office hours have been rescheduled to 3 p.m, and slip down the back stairs. The rear doors open onto a mulch path through a picturesque, heavily manicured wood of less than an acre. The path continues past the horse stables and ends at the road. Across the road is a cul-de-sac of hundred-year-old staff cottages.

I've only ever been to Carlo's cottage at night, and arrived by the road so no one on campus would see me. But with the notoriety the graffiti has given me, I figure, what the hell. Mother Mary Joseph might tell me I'm fired this afternoon, anyway.

I'm joking. I think. Surely I can't be fired for graffiti someone else has written. But then there were all those women burned as witches because their accusers said they had cast spells on them. Is the world really so different now?

Perhaps she can't fire me for that, but there's a morals clause in my contract. I thought it was funny and antiquated when I signed it, and didn't give it a second thought. Until now.

Opening the front door of the cottage, I feel the rush of cold air from Carlo's living room window unit. He doesn't just like it cold, he likes the air to be on the verge of forming ice crystals. And this despite the fact that outside, the temperature is a pleasant seventy-two degrees. The cottage is tidier than my little house, as well. While a lot of the furniture is simple IKEA, it's accented with colorful throws and pillows in a variety of textures, and strategically placed candles. A row of three vases in different shades of red sit on the bookcase that separates the dining room from the kitchen. There's little other decoration. There are no clothes strewn about (as at my house), only the throws and a folded newspaper that might have been read and carelessly refolded. A faint odor of tobacco hangs in the air; an (empty) ashtray is parked way too close to the espresso maker for my taste. So much about the man feels unexpected to me. Foreign—although I don't intend the pun.

“Carlo?” It’s obvious he’s not here, and although it’s lunchtime, when he’s usually home, I realize I should have called him first. Unless I secretly meant to come here while he was out. You might suspect me of that, and you might be half right.

Carlo exhausts me with his care. With his need. With his overtly affectionate ways. And the sex. Did I mention the sex? Practically gymnastic! As well as several other words that end in *-ic*. It’s hard to believe I’ve gotten tired of it. Kelly told me that with all of her pregnancies, she wanted sex every night, just as soon as the first trimester was over. That’s not me, at all. And after we have sex, we have very little to say to one another.

I walk from room to room, feeling melancholy.

In the kitchen, I turn on the tap. Not wanting to dirty a glass to let Carlo know I’ve been there, I take a long, sloppy drink directly from the faucet. *Don’t ever do that, okay?* I tell the baby. *Always use a cup.*

Outside the window, the sky is dark, and fat raindrops scare up dust in the ragged brown patches of dirt in the yard. It’s twenty minutes after 1 p.m. If it starts raining hard, Carlo might even come home until the storm moves on. But this afternoon—before I even find out what’s going to happen with Mother Mary Joseph—isn’t the right time to tell him I don’t want to marry him. That I don’t want to be his *cara mia* anymore. And I especially can’t tell him here, in his own house, where he would have to relive it every day. It isn’t fair. I feel like I could’ve answered him on Friday night, and not dragged this out. It’s obvious to me that we aren’t right together.

I look around for an umbrella, or at least something I can put over my head before I start back to my office. In the bedroom I find my blue Nike hoodie I bought back in March. It will do. I slip my arms into it, tuck my hair back into the hood, and start the zipper. As I pull the tab upward, the hoodie hugs my body and feels more snug than it did the last time I wore it. Standing sideways in front of the full-length mirror on the back of the door, I can’t help but smile at myself. Well, both of us.

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Every school I attended as a child was a public school, so I never had a nun as a teacher. Sister Mary Paul was a wonderful introduction to nuns, but I’m afraid she made me think that all nuns must be generous and kind, despite

what I heard from my friends about them. I was wrong.

What I didn't expect was that they would be so very old. There are only a dozen women left in this particular Sisters of Mary of the Holy Cross Convent, and all of them are in their late seventies or eighties. Most smile benignly, pushing their walkers or holding on to nurses as they *take exercise*, as Mother Mary Joseph refers to it. None of them teach any longer. The mobile ones show up for commencements and graduations, sitting in their stall high above the crowd like a row of silent crows. Sister Mary Paul was the last one to work in the college.

Mother Mary Joseph has never seemed like a kind person. While I've never known her to be publicly cruel, she isn't afraid to tangle with the lay administration or anyone else who gets in the way of her plans for the convent. Everyone is a little afraid of her. Including Carlo, including me.

When I hear her heavily accented *come in* in answer to my knock, I want to turn and run away. Instead, I go inside.

Today, Mother Mary Joseph is more frightening than ever. Rather than sitting behind her grand walnut desk, watched over by a massive painting of Mary kneeling at the foot of her son's cross, she is seated on a tufted leather sofa. The low table in front of her is laid with a silver tea service, china cups, and dainty matching plates. A nearby pastry stand holds piles of cookies and pastries. Feeling like Alice in Wonderland, I glance around the room for signs that my head is about to be chopped off at Mother Mary Joseph's command.

"How do you like your tea, Professor Jensen? Milk? Sugar?" She furrows her wrinkled brow. "I believe we have some almond milk, too, but I have no idea how one goes about milking almonds." She smirks at me like a naughty freshman.

Dear God, what have I done to deserve this?

Once we get the tea sorted out, she tells me how delightful the cookies are.

"Only one or two cookies for me, thank you," I say, stiffly. "I try not to eat too much sugar. They say it causes inflammation and all kinds of other health risks." Apparently when I'm nervous I turn into a talking *Reader's Digest*.

Mother Mary Joseph's small, birdlike eyes flicker to my stomach for the briefest of seconds. Her strange smile doesn't falter.

She knows.

Thanks, Carlo.

But what did I expect? I should have anticipated this the night I let Carlo inside me even though I'd forgotten to take my pill the previous night, and didn't have them with me to take that night, either. I could have scripted this whole meeting. Okay, maybe not quite. She's not acting like the Mother Mary Joseph I know.

Holding out a plate with two shortbread cookies half-dipped in chocolate, she says, "Your dean tells me your writing workshops are very popular."

"The girls seem to like them, and they show up prepared for class. This is a slight exaggeration, but I sense this is all a kind of stage play, anyway. I'll stay in my role.

"I get so little opportunity to talk to members of the faculty except for official functions." She sips from her teacup, making the faintest of slurping sounds, and puts it down. "I can only assume they're happy teaching here if they stay. We haven't had a faculty member choose to leave us in..." She narrows her eyes, considering, and looks to the ceiling, which is laid out in a grid of elegant wood-framed squares. "Five years."

Cat and mouse. My turn.

"Right before I came here. My predecessor left to take care of her elderly parents? That's what I remember."

"Family. With Joseph's love for Mary, God showed us how powerful the bonds of human love can be. How we need each other."

Ah, here we go. I can't help but offer, "Didn't Jesus leave his family?"

"As did I." Her smile is gone, her voice subdued. "We were both called to serve. Not everyone is. God and the sisters are my family. And Carlo, of course."

A silence as heavy as the raindrops on the window hangs between us. She's mentioned Carlo. At last.

"Mother Mary Joseph." I start to stand up, but realize I have a plate in my lap. Moving it and *then* standing up seems melodramatic. This entire situation feels melodramatic. If a student wrote this scene I'd make gentle fun of it in class, telling her she should consider writing for a soap opera. Why can't I just have a baby, and go on with my life? I don't care about the stupid graffiti, but I'm not going to play this game with her all day. "I'm guessing you wanted

me here to speak about the graffiti on the overpass. I don't know who put it up there or why. It looks bad for me, and for the college, I know. I'll contact the police this afternoon to see what they can do." I suddenly feel like a supplicant, even though I haven't done anything wrong.

The nun gives me a smile I can only describe as smug. Gone is the whimsy of the almond milk smile. "I have always believed that where there's smoke, there's fire. But I don't want to be harsh with you, Mia. Paint can be removed. The stain of shame is harder to erase." She steepled her forefingers and rests them against her lips for a moment. "Still, there are ways. Some easier, some more difficult."

"Shame? Why should I be ashamed?" But wasn't shame my first reaction when I saw the overpass? I'd had to beat it back, decide not to own it. The whole thing was really just an inconvenience. A curiosity. "I did nothing to be ashamed of. I don't know who wrote that about me. I don't even know why they didn't call me something more..." I falter. "More in the current vernacular." Out pops Mia, Class Vocabulary Champion, to join *Reader's Digest* Mia.

She shakes her head and moves her own cookie plate from her lap to the table. Emboldened, I set mine down right across from hers. So there.

"Are you sure you have nothing to be ashamed of, my dear? I hope you know you can talk to me. Or I can pick up the phone right now and call Father Hubert. He can meet you in the chapel, and you can talk to him. As you're not of our faith, you can't enjoy the sacrament of confession. But he's a very good listener. It's good to unburden one's soul."

"I've heard that," I say. "No, thank you." The idea of sharing anything about my relationship with Carlo, or even my own feelings, with a stranger who—for all I know—enjoys hearing the gritty details of people's lives, rankles me. God and I speak directly.

Mother Mary Joseph leans forward. "Well, if you need any assistance with the police to rectify that particular situation, please let our public safety manager know. And should you require legal assistance to address it, we have very good lawyers on retainer. *Very good.*"

We both know she's not talking about help with the graffiti. They'll get rid of me if I try to have this child without being married.

I could take it to court if they fire me, but there's a chance that I'll lose. And I can see that it wouldn't bother Mother Mary Joseph a bit. Except for what she said about family. The child inside me is related to her through Carlo, of course. Maybe she's the one who has something to lose.

"I'll keep that in mind." I dab my lips with the delicate linen napkin she gave me with my tea and rest it beside my full cup. Standing up, I look at my watch. It's seriously bad manners, I know, to be the one to end this tête-à-tête. "I'm sorry, but I have some prep to do before my office hours. If you'll excuse me?" I smile as warmly as I can, even though I feel frozen, as though my body is full of ice.

I turn to leave without looking back. I wish I could feel smug, or at least satisfied, but there's only a sense of relief at it being over.

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Kelly's texts have become increasingly frantic, so before I open my door for office hours I let her know everything's okay. She suggests that she come over after she picks the kids up at school, deals with homework, and gets the family dinner. She tells me that she'll bring the wine. I beg off, telling her I'm too tired. I'll have to tell her soon why my wine-drinking days are over for the foreseeable future.

Office hours are light today, as everyone is seeing other teachers to talk about their midterm worries. One of the joys of being a creative writing teacher is that I don't have to give tests. As soon as office hours are over, I head for my car to go home. I haven't called Carlo, and he hasn't tried to reach me again. I'm not sure what to think. Did his aunt, Mother Mary Joseph, call him into her office after I left? It makes me sad to think of him being on her side in some way. But if he wants me to marry him, and she wants us to marry, then I guess they're on the same side. Still, I hope they want the same thing for different reasons. I think Carlo genuinely cares for the baby and me. Who knows what Mother Mary Joseph really wants.

As I approach the overpass on the way home, I think of stopping on the other side to look at it again. I should probably take a picture for evidence. Except I don't want a picture. It's not even lightly amusing anymore. It's taken on a new, rather sinister meaning in my head. I drive beneath the overpass and don't even look at the graffiti that's surely in my rearview mirror.

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Headlights sweep across my living room wall, and I know Carlo has come. When I hear his car door shut, I get up from the couch, where I've been reading the latest Maggie Hope mystery, and open my front door. Across the street, Kelly peers out her living room blinds, and I raise my hand in a brief, cheerful wave. She's used to seeing Carlo's car in my driveway, and knows that he sometimes stays over. Yet she still doesn't know about the baby. Or his proposal.

Carlo looks sheepish, and achingly young. I'm only a year older than he, but I can tell he's going to be one of those men who looks young his entire life. He slips one arm around me and kisses my cheek.

"Coffee?" I ask. It's kind of a joke because he thinks my coffee is terrible.

"Nothing for me." He follows me into the kitchen, where I fill the kettle to make herbal tea.

"I met with Mother Mary Joseph today," I say, not looking at him.

"The graffiti? I wish you would've answered my messages, Mia. Or called me. I heard about it first thing this morning. I would've warned you, but I knew you were already on your way up the mountain." I hear the scrape of a chair against the wood floor, and turn to see him sitting at the kitchen table. We both look at the box between the salt-and-pepper shakers.

My laugh feels awkward and false. "It's not that big of a deal. I'd just like to find out who did it, and why."

He doesn't answer, but just stares downward between his arms, which rest on the table.

"What did she say to you, *cara*? Did she hurt you?"

"How could she hurt me?" I'm genuinely puzzled. "She was rude. I can handle rude." I sit down across from him. "You told her about the baby, didn't you?"

He grabs my hand. "Please say you'll marry me. We must marry. I love you, Mia. I love our baby." His dark eyes have that tender look that nails my heart every time. I've told myself a thousand times that I could learn to really love him, if only I tried. If I gave him time. Gave myself time. I tell myself, but I can't feel it.

"Why in the world did you tell her?" I pull my hand away. "You should

have talked to me about it first, Carlo. She's threatening to fire me if I don't marry you. Of course she didn't come right out and say it, but she kept talking about how ashamed I must be. And then she brought up lawyers. I'm not stupid!"

When he pounds his fist on the table, I jump. "She said she would be kind. She said she understood and it would all work out. It seemed like she was even a little happy about the baby. Damn her. Then she..." He doesn't finish.

We sit in silence for a few tense moments. The electric kettle flicks off. Carlo watches me.

"I'm sorry. I can't marry you. It doesn't feel right. And with all this angst from your aunt, I just want to run away. I don't know what's going to happen. Really, I'm sorry." I slide the ring box slowly toward him. "It's a beautiful ring. And someday you'll make a really great husband, Carlo."

He makes a face. "Sure."

"I *do* know you're going to be a great dad. Our little girl has to have two parents, you know. Right?"

"I told her it wouldn't work." I spy guilt in his face as he looks away from me.

"What wouldn't work?" Inside me, the baby gives a ticklish flip.

"She tried to get me to paint the overpass. To shame you into getting married. She thought if you were embarrassed enough, you would give up and marry me. I told her it wouldn't work, and that it was a foolish idea."

"What?" Then I realize I'm not all that surprised—only that she would actually try to execute such a ridiculous plan. *Harlot*. She would use that word. "But you *didn't* do it?"

He scoffs. "Do you think I'm an idiot, Mia? I wouldn't do that to anyone. Especially someone I love. How could you think I would do that to you?"

I've wounded him, and feel sorry. "You didn't warn me. Why didn't you warn me when she first asked you?"

"I thought she'd give it up. When I heard about it from one of the security guys on his rounds this morning, I couldn't believe it. I went to her, and she said she got someone who was more loyal to do it. I think it was a kid in the machine shop who works on that old Buick of hers. I've never liked him."

"Wow. What's wrong with her? Why is she so cold?" At least I won't have

to try to be nice to her anymore. Carlo has to be her nephew for the rest of their lives.

He takes my hand again. “I won’t let them fire you. They can’t make you leave. Not because of this. I’ll leave if I have to.”

I don’t think his leaving would make any difference, though I don’t tell him right now. I’m too tired.

Standing in the doorway, a few minutes later, we say an unfamiliar kind of good-bye. We’re almost shy with one another in our new non-couple status. I wonder if a part of him doesn’t feel a little relieved. Maybe not.

I close and lock the door, and shut off the porch light. Carlo backs out of the driveway, his headlights sweeping the opposite way across the living room wall. The car rumbles away, headed toward the mountain.

In the kitchen, my phone rings, but I know it’s probably Kelly trying to find out what’s going on.

Leaning against the back of the door, I close my eyes and put a hand to my belly.

*Always remember that tomorrow begins another day, darling girl.*

# THE NEWS ANCHOR

LISA PATTON

**H**UNDREDS OF MINUTE PERSPIRATION BEADS cover his nose. Nowhere else. Just his nose. One bead of sweat for every oversized pore. It's a telltale sign he's anxious.

I'd love to say I hardly notice them anymore, but that's simply not true. We talk face to face at least ten times a day. When I was little, my mom taught me the art of looking someone in the eye while conversing. Yet, inevitably, I find myself numbering his sweat beads. One two three four...fifteen sixteen... forty-five...fifty. I'm no longer listening. I'm counting.

I'm horrible, right? Shallow and callous. Mean. Why can't I just overlook his...*affliction* and focus on all the other nice things about him? He stands up when women walk in the room. He pulls out our chairs. He's complimentary. He's even cute—in a dorky sort of way. Nice hair, nice teeth.

But his socks. Nylon, jet-black stretchy things that crawl way up to his knees. His pants are too short—way too short—that's how I know he wears knee-highs. Plus he told me once that the doctor suggested he wear control socks since he stands all day long. They help with his poor circulation. So does his back supporter. And he wears bad shoes—God love him. One can always tell

something about a person by their shoes. His are black, non-leather slip-ons, underneath those high-water pants. To make him even a notch nerdier, he's never without a pen or a penlight in his shirt pocket.

God is going to strike me down dead, no question about it. But reasoning eases the guilt and helps with remorse. God knows I need it.

"Here's your script, Mia," he says, handing it to me from the front of the news desk. "You left it in the break room." Five minutes earlier he had pulled out my chair and made sure I had two bottles of water on set. Today he's wearing a dress shirt. And khakis. Normally it's jeans and a T-shirt. The plan must have worked.

After a quick smile, I thank him. "What would I do without you?"

"Die, I guess." He snickers. That's Carol's attempt at humor. Bless his heart.

Yes, *his* name, unfortunately, is Carol. Carol Frampton. He's my forty-two-year-old camera operator. Which means he stares into a close-up frame of my face from 5:45, when we're supposed to be on set, until 6:32, five days a week. He knows my every wrinkle, my every pore, my every blemish. Whether or not my lipstick is a centimeter out of line or smeared on my teeth is one of Carol's chief concerns, and he's the first to care if I have a strand of hair out of place. Making sure I look fabulous is something he's willingly added to his job description. He prevents me from ridicule.

As despicable as I might seem, I will say this—in my defense—I don't join in when everyone else talks behind his back. I keep my feelings to myself. From time to time I may snicker a bit—but only on the inside. It's funny when Paul teases him. Especially since Paul's our TD. That's technical director—the person in control of the control room. Something about Paul's goofy tone of voice when he mimics Carol is downright hilarious. It just is.

Playing pranks on Carol is one of the favored pastimes of the guys in the control room. And poor Carol falls for every one of them. That must be why they keep doing it. When they all shut up, as soon as he walks in the room, and change the subject *on cue*, you'd think they were actors in a comedy, not techno geeks. It's like we work on the set of a sitcom. Instead of *The Office*, it's *The Newsroom*.

Carol's been working at the station ten years to my two months. Yet they give him no respect. Because of his nose thing, everyone in the control room

calls him Beady—compliments of my coanchor Tim. The first time someone referred to him as “Beady,” I knew exactly whom they were talking about. Camera people with Beady’s experience and willingness to be content with a low salary are hard to come by. I’m surprised they risk losing him.

The way I’m carrying on might suggest that I think I’m perfect. Truth be known, I don’t feel that way at all. In fact, I’m obsessed with my imperfection. First, I hate the way I’m aging; it’s anything but attractive, and I’ve had work done. I had to take out a loan to do it, but it’s justified. I can’t let 261,000 people tune in to a hag. They shouldn’t see cracks around my eyes or drooping eyelids. Certainly not a pair of parentheses framing my mouth. Instead, they should see refined, unblemished beauty. Marley James at Channel Ten looks like she’s twenty-five, even though she’s ten years older than I am. If it kills me, I’m determined to find out the name of her plastic surgeon.

My mother is the only person who knows I’ve gone under the knife, and she thinks I’ve lost my mind. I don’t dare tell her that next up is a forehead lift. From what I understand, the lines above and between my eyebrows will disappear for at least ten years, despite the three screws they’ll drive into my skull to make it happen. If you’re wondering how I would agree to this type of surgery, just to look better, consider how you would feel to have a close-up of your face framed for every person in town to notice every single centimeter. I suppose I should be grateful I was born with a nice one. I am. I’ve just chosen a career that puts extra pressure on keeping it youthful.

Mom has told me time and time again, “You’re a spring chicken, Mia. Forty is not old—you’re still a baby. You’re beautiful just the way you are. Besides, beauty is more important on the inside.” All mothers say that about their daughters. And she flat doesn’t know what she’s talking about. She’s small-town simple, not the anchor of the 6 o’clock news in Augusta, Georgia, home of the Masters Tournament.

The other reason for hating myself is not taking up for Carol. Why I don’t is a mystery, and it weighs on me constantly. Especially after what happened last night. Best I can figure is that I’m much too concerned about what the bigwigs around here think of me. It doesn’t excuse it. But it’s true. And the deeper truth is: I’ve worked my whole life for this job. I’ve forgone the

chance to have kids for this job. If I don't join in with the others, they'll talk about me, too. I've heard them to do it to anyone they dislike, and pretty soon I'll be out the door and on the curb. Dispensable is my middle name. There are hundreds, probably thousands, of women dying to take my seat on the set of WATW.

At first, instead of a news anchor, I thought I wanted to be a famous actress. As the star of all my high school plays, I was convinced it would be easy. That was before I spent six years in a few uncompromising positions struggling to find work in Hollywood. Now, besides my WATW salary, I make a fairly decent living on the side. As a voice-over artist. I've landed several national commercials and my reputation is growing. I can sound like a child, an old woman, or even a vamp. You'd never in a million years know it was me.

"One minute...then a two-minute outbreak," Josh, the floor manager, announces. "Mia, we're coming straight to you. Stand by. One minute, please."

There was a press conference earlier, and today's schedule has been delayed five minutes. We won't be starting at 6 o'clock sharp.

"Mia."

I look up.

Carol's behind his camera, but I can tell it's his voice. "Your blouse is gaping at the bustline."

A volcanic eruption of guffaws fills the studio. Not only are the people on the floor laughing, the entire control room upstairs is exploding in hysterics. We can hear them through the monitor. What makes this extra funny, I'm sure, is my most recent augmentation.

A quick glance down at my blouse reveals a slight gap in the material just above the middle button. Even though it's hardly noticeable, I adjust it anyway. Then blow Carol a kiss. Just to ease his angst. The frigid climate in the room is not working in my favor. Ever since the surgery, I nip at the slightest drop in temperature. I've been thinking of buying a pair of breast pads.

Tim, my coanchor, seems to find this comment funnier than anyone. He slaps his hand on the desk, leans back in his chair, and laughs like a child who's been held down and tickled. It's two minutes before airtime, and tears

are rolling down his cheeks.

Quite honestly, I want to slap the shit out of him.

I haven't discussed my boob job with anyone except my mother. Certainly not with anyone here at the station. But I have noticed people, men in particular, talking directly to my chest. People are wondering. I've caught Tim staring on several occasions, and I know him well enough to know he's dying to ask me if I've had them done. But for now, he's happy with insinuations and wisecracks.

"Hey, Beady, why don't *you* fix it for her?" he says, then crumples over the news desk, his forehead landing with a thud.

More laughter.

I cut my eyes his way. He turns and presses his left cheek on the desk, gazing at me with a goofy smile.

"Hush," I say, with a slight undertone of enjoyment.

He shrugs. "Aw, come on. Give the poor guy a thrill."

Floor manager says, "One minute." Then he tells Carol, "Center up your shot on Mia." Josh takes his cues from Paul upstairs in the control room.

I look down at my script. Scoop up the papers then level them on the counter. Earlier, I had marked my notes in the break room. If the teleprompter freezes or goes wiggy—and that happens all the time—we've got hard copies. We'll never lose a beat, or not much of one.

"God knows he could use it," Tim mutters, intentionally louder than he should. Everyone hears him. His mic is hot.

I can't see Carol's face, but I can see the outline of his body in the darkness. He's as still and quiet as a corpse. It must be a sore spot, not having a girlfriend. And the poor guy's never been married. Then again, neither have I.

Tim leans over toward me, mutters, "What are the odds?"

"The odds of what?" I ask without looking at him. The bitter taste of guilt rises in my throat.

"He's ever been laid?" My coanchor is nauseously arrogant and more impressed with himself than any man I've ever met. It gets harder to stomach him every time I'm around him. I look down at his tanned bare legs and running shoes tucked under the news desk. Although our viewers see his coat and tie, he wears golf shorts underneath almost every day.

“Three, two, one,” our floor manager announces.

We’re live. And I push the Pause button on my shame. At least for thirty minutes.

“Live from the WATW broadcast center in downtown Augusta,” the voice-over booms from the control room. “This is the WATW Evening News.”

The camera cuts to one of our reporters in the field. “Heavy rain leads to a flooding in a popular shopping mall. I’m Amy Simmons. Coming up, I’ll tell you what road is closed, and we’ll show you the damage.”

Another camera cut. “City Councilman Dean Williams has been caught in a sex scandal. I’m Cole Fisher, live from City Hall. We’ll bring you reactions from his constituents and local Augustans.”

“Ever wondered what it’s like to put your hand inside a lion’s mouth? Local Augustan Seth Poyner is a former lion tamer for Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey. We’ll take you inside his lion-taming facility and tell you what he’s up to, now that the circus is no more.” Riley Moore forgets to give his name, but the Chyron graphic at the bottom of the screen gives our viewers that information.

Then the camera pans in to a dual screen of Tim and me. “It is the twenty-fifth day of May. I’m Mia Jensen.”

“And I’m Tim Kaplan. Looks like we’re having some wild weather tonight. Let’s head straight over to our chief meteorologist, Ron Olson.”

Ron takes it from there. Five minutes later we’re dark.

“Who the hell would want to sleep with you?” A chilling voice, Carol’s voice, calls out of the darkness, just after we break for commercial. The corpse has risen from the dead, and the set is now a graveyard—silent, cold, eerie. *Just how far can a person be pushed before he snaps?* shoots through my mind.

A shocked but undaunted Tim looks up from his script with a pseudo smile plastered across his face. “Hopefully not you, man.”

Scattered laughter. Then Josh bellows through his mic, with a suppressed chuckle, “Quiet on the set!” Even Josh teases Beady. And they work five feet from one another.

With a hand aside my face, to block the reading of my lips, I turn to Tim and mouth, “I feel sorry for him.” This is risky. Carol may be looking at me through the camera. “Can you give him a break?” It comes out more as a plea

than a command. My mother's voice echoes. *If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all.*

Tim's eyebrows bounce. He mouths back, "You and Beady?" Then he swings a finger back and forth between the darkness and me.

I roll my eyes, then mutter, "Yeah, right."

Without question, I should be taking up for Carol. I should appreciate him no matter if he's a dork or not. Yet I'm more worried about what Tim thinks. I reason: I've worked my whole life for this job. I've finally made the move from small market to medium. From Brunswick, Georgia, with 70,000 viewers, to Augusta, with 260,000. And I've worked my butt off to do it. By the time I'm forty-five I plan to be in the majors. New York City. L.A. or SFO. If I side with Tim, all is good, but if I stick up for Carol, I risk falling out of favor with the male powers that be. As far as women's rights have come lately, it's still a boys' club at WATW. Always will be.

Tim Kaplan is Mr. Augusta. He walks into the Masters and there's a parting of the Red Sea. He's been at the station twenty-five years and will not be going anywhere until he retires. There's no question that he can catapult me forward. A Tim Kaplan recommendation carries weight of the grandest proportion. I have no choice but to put up with him.

As soon as the broadcast is over, 6:35 on the dot, I unhook my mic and gather my script. Tim notices, and as I'm pushing out my chair says, "What's your hurry?"

"Nature calls," I say over my shoulder. The sound of my heels clicking off set is magnified on the wooden floor. Beelining it to the couch, I grab my sweater and feel the immediate warmth as I wrap it around me. I'll never get used to the arctic temperature inside a television studio.

I'm stepping toward the door when I hear a voice whispering directly in my ear: "Since when do you feel sorry for him?" Tim's breath is cool from the mint he's just slipped in his mouth. His words slice me in half, but he speaks the truth. I certainly didn't act as if I felt sorry for Carol last night. And the twenty-four hours since have produced enough shame for an entire lifetime. I can hardly stand in my own skin. Instead of whipping around I turn slowly to face him. There is pleading in my eyes, and I have to force a smile.

"The guy has a picture of his mommy on his desk," he says, as if that justifies

the crime.

“I have a picture of my mommy on my desk.” Her face pops into my mind’s eye. The kindest person ever born. She’d never hurt anyone. Especially not Beady. After all he’s done for me.

“That’s different,” Tim says.

After a forced grin, I head to the door. Shoving it open with my shoulder, I feel the warmth as I step out into the hallway.

I don’t have to turn around to know his eyes are on my rear end.

The ladies’ room is down the next hall. Just inside the door, a built-in vanity takes up space. Rachel is in the cushioned chair, staring into a lighted makeup mirror. She anchors the eleven.

After greeting her with a simple “Hey,” I head into the middle stall.

“Something wrong?” she asks.

“Tim,” I say with a loud sigh then lift the lid and squat over the toilet seat. What I don’t say is: *I’m* what’s wrong with me.

“What’s he done now?”

“Nothing new.” I squeeze my eyes together, trying to block the thoughts.

At first she doesn’t answer. Rachel and Tim are coanchors of the eleven. She’s been here as many years as he has. She gave up anchoring the six so she could be with her family at dinnertime. Now her husband stays home with their teenagers at night. “He’s a career dick,” she finally says. “Get used to him. He’s not going away.”

After pulling up my panties, I turn around and press the toilet handle. And imagine Tim’s pleading eyes as I flush his head down the commode. Then I see myself swirling around behind him. Feeling nauseated, I unlock the stall.

“He’s just pissed he can’t get in your pants,” Rachel says as I turn on the faucet.

“No way.” Looking at her through the mirror, I lather my hands and attempt to scrub away the guilt. Finally I reach for a paper towel, then another. And another. “Is it mandatory that he and I become *close*? Is that the way it works around here?”

“Of course not. It’s 2018. But the more you act like you’re unimpressed with him, the harder he’ll try. And the more of a challenge you become. Just agree with him. Take part in his shenanigans. He’ll think he’s conquered you

and move on. Remember me telling you that the week you started?”

“I do.” *But I still can’t stand him*, I think to myself. I wink and let the door shut behind me.

Once in the newsroom, I head straight to my cubicle. Although I’m supposed to finish writing a package for tomorrow’s newscast, I decide to grab dinner first. As I’m pulling my purse from the back of my file drawer, I notice Mom’s picture on the back corner of my desk. And hear her voice. “The Sixth Commandment is not only about taking someone’s life. It’s about murdering their spirit. We must be careful how we treat people. And above all, we must watch our tongues. It’s the most hurtful weapon of all.” Blocking out her voice, I obsess, yet again, over the decision I made last night.

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After the broadcast was over, I had just returned to the newsroom when Paul appeared at my cubicle. There was a mischievous grin on his face. “We need your help.” He’s not my boss, but he’s a big deal at the station. I care a great deal about what he thinks of me.

“Who’s we?” I asked. As a station newbie, it felt nice to be included.

“Tim and me. And the guys upstairs.”

“Okay, sure.”

He sat down in my chair, rolling up to my computer. His fingers flew expertly over my keyboard. Tinder appeared, and within moments Carol’s picture was dead center of my screen. “We created Beady a Tinder account.” Paul slid his palms together. “Watch this.” He clicked on another photo and read aloud. “Single guy looking for a relationship. Open to all possibilities.” Then he laughed, like he was proud of himself. He thought he was one clever dude.

*Mean*, I thought, but a bigger part of me agreed it was a little funny at the same time.

“It gets better. Look at this one.” Paul clicked on another picture—of Carol with his mom. “Dixon stole it off Beady’s desk during the broadcast. You’d never know it was photoshopped.”

“I’m impressed,” I said. And I meant it. About Dixon’s photoshopping skills.

Paul wheels around to look at me. “So here’s where you come in. Call him up and disguise your voice. Tell him you find him wildly attractive and that

you want a date. Plan a meeting place.”

My eyes bulged.

“You’re the only one who can pull it off.”

“Okay...but he might know—”

“Block your phone. Punch in star-sixty-seven and then his number. He’ll never know it’s you.”

Paul knew I had no one to rush home to. He knew I wasn’t dating anyone—at least not at the moment. My last “friend” and I called it quits when he hooked up with a tacky gym rat and one of my girlfriends spotted them in the back seat of his Jeep. It stung at first, I can’t deny it, but I got over it. From the beginning Mom told me he had no character. But his face—and that body. Physical attraction can be wildly deceptive.

I could feel my heart racing. It’s one thing to laugh along with the guys when they do the teasing, but it’s something altogether different to be a part of the wickedness. A strong voice inside my head said, “Don’t do it. Take a stand for Carol.” But an even stronger voice said, “Yeah, but if you don’t, what happens to you?”

What happens if I don’t join the team? I hadn’t worked at the station long enough to know. So without considering Carol’s feelings, I let that second voice win. I held my nose and pulled the trigger.

We had scampered out to Paul’s car to make the call. The background noise in the newsroom would have been a dead giveaway. And we couldn’t risk someone overhearing us.

As the two of us sat inside his brand-new BMW, I obligingly blocked my number with a star-sixty-seven, punched in the numbers to Carol’s mobile, then changed my voice to a sultry sleazebag.

He answered on the first ring. “Hello.”

“Carol Frampton?” I asked.

“This is him.”

“Hi, this is Bunny Williams.” I knew I had met Paul’s approval when he squeezed his face to keep from laughing and shot me a thumbs-up. “I saw your ad and thought I’d call.”

“Excuse me?”

“I saw your profile on Tinder.”

“I don’t use Tinder.”

“Hmm. I’ve got it right here. There’s a very nice picture of you. It says you work at Channel Five. Are you the same guy?”

“I work at Channel Five. But I don’t use Tinder.”

“That’s odd. I’m looking at a Tinder profile that says you’re a camera guru, a dog lover, a coffee lover, and that you enjoy long walks in the park.”

Paul covered his face and pressed his head back into the headrest to keep from screaming. A dark crimson color washed over his ears.

Carol is silent on the other end.

I press on. “Why don’t you meet me tomorrow after work? We could go out. Have a good time.”

“Who is this?” he asks.

“My name is Bunny Williams. How about the Starbucks near Channel Five? We’ll grab coffee and see where it goes. Maybe get dinner.”

I could hear noisy breathing on his end. Several times he started to speak up, then he’d stop abruptly. After a long pause he said, “Sure. Why not?” I could almost detect a lift in his voice. “I get off around seven. Can you meet at seven ten?”

Now I had to suppress the laugh. “Sounds perfect. It’s a date.”

“How will I know you?”

“I’ll know *you*,” I said. Then hung up without a good-bye.

Paul shrieked when I ended the call. “You’re a *genius!*” Then he slapped a hand on the steering wheel. “I can’t wait to tell the guys.”

It only took a moment for the guilt to begin its slow crawl through my body. From my hair follicles down through the chambers of my heart, then out the tips of my toes. My entire being blazed with self-disgust.

Adult bullying. That’s exactly what it was. I am an adult bully. I squeezed my eyes shut at the mere thought. And swallowed the bile in my throat.

Paul sensed my regret. “He’ll never know it was you, Mia. He’ll blame us. He’ll think we found a random chick to make the call.”

“But suppose someone tells him it was me? And worse, suppose he really drives to Starbucks tomorrow night? What if he truly thinks he has a date?” I buried my face in my hands.

“Stop. He’ll never know. Besides, *we* devised the plan, not you. You just put

the cherry on top. Don't worry about it." Paul patted my arm before opening his door. "Gotta get back to the control room. You're awesome, Mia."

When we were five feet away from his car he reached behind him and clicked his remote. The car beeped in response.

That's when the nausea started. And when I began to loathe myself.

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Remembering this, pain shoots through my abdomen, I'm not sure if it's hunger or another reminder of my own egomania. Either way, I've got to get out of here. I need a respite—from all things WATW. Right before I stand to leave, Mom's picture catches my eye. Instead of listening to her voice reverberate inside my head, I reach over and turn the frame facedown.

As I'm hurrying to get to my car, winding through the newsroom, I pick up my pace and practically run down the hall. Meanwhile, that second voice I heard yesterday, the one that convinced me to go along with the crowd, tantalizes me again. *Aren't you the picture of friendship? You were so worried about yourself that you threw poor Beady under the bus. You ridiculed the very guy who prevents you from ridicule. You forsook him for your own greediness.*

When I turn down the final hall toward the parking lot, I see Carol holding the door for one of the salespeople. A fifty-something woman who has been working here since she graduated from college. She's short like Carol. And she has even shorter hair. I've never seen her in a dress. The rumors about her personal life drip from the lips of the control room guys like saliva from dogs in heat. She's another misfit—like Carol.

The two of them are talking inside the doorframe, even though sheets of rain are falling just beyond. I watch as Carol opens her umbrella. She hunches underneath, as if that might keep more of the water off her back. "Have a good night, Carol," she calls over her shoulder then steps out into the rain.

When I make it to the door Carol props it open for me, too. I don't have an umbrella so I pause in the doorframe. And look out at the downpour. "Yucky night, huh?" I tell him.

"Not so bad. We need the rain." Carol has to lift his chin to talk to me. He's only five feet four. As one who stands five feet nine inches tall, I'm used to that from women. Not men.

"You're right. We do need the rain," I say.

“You headed home?”

“After I grab dinner.” I think about home. For me it’s a luxury town house in downtown Augusta overlooking Broad Street with a view of the Savannah River. Just a few miles from the Augusta National Golf Club. What’s home like for him? On his salary?

Carol has a large Channel 5 golf umbrella in his hand, while the other holds the door open. The rain is falling sideways. “I’ll walk you to your car,” he says.

Standing this close to him, I detect the scent of cologne. Add that to his dress clothes, dress shoes, the beads of sweat on his nose—he’s most definitely on his way to Starbucks. With my eyes squeezed shut, an attempt to erase the last twenty-four hours, I dig for my keys inside my purse. I can’t look at him.

*Pop.* The noise of his opening umbrella startles me. Carol takes a step forward then hooks an arm through mine. “Watch your step.”

As we’re running to my car, which is only a few yards away—as an anchor I have reserved parking—Carol says, “Wanna know a secret?”

The rain is deafening, but I hear him loud and clear. “Sure.” I click the unlock button on my remote.

“I have a date tonight.” The sweat beads are all over his nose. And it’s because of me.

*Damn it, Mia. Tell him. Tell him it’s a hoax. Stop him right this minute. Do it. Be his friend.*

*That’s right. Be a friend to the company nerd, the devil on my shoulder screams. Go against Tim and Paul, and see how far that gets you.*

*You be the one to invite him to coffee, the kind voice says. Then you take him to dinner.*

Paul said a few of them were parking outside of Starbucks and watching the whole thing go down. Maybe they’re already there. I could tell him right now that it’s all a big lie. But then I get the others in trouble and ruin the fun.

“That’s great, Carol,” I finally say.

He opens my car door, waits for me to sit, they hurriedly pushes it shut to keep me from getting even wetter. “Have a good night.” I read his lips through the glass.

“You, too, Carol,” I say with a wave.

As I'm backing out of my parking spot, despite the roar of the rain, I hear the loudest, most deafening *bang* imaginable, as if it's a sonic boom. The intensity is so great, I jump, then feel my pulse quicken. I can actually feel the noise reverberating in my chest. I sit frozen in fear a minute or two, pondering what to do. Should I go back inside? Glancing at the station through my rearview mirror, I notice Sid Hollins, our chief engineer, standing in the doorframe with hands on his hips. His gaze is lifted up at our broadcast tower, only a few yards from the door. Then it occurs to me. Lightning must have struck. We're most likely off-air.

Then I remember Carol. I spot him at the end of the parking lot, only a few feet from his car, staring up at the tower.

"Go back inside. Don't go to Starbucks," I say out loud, but to myself.

Obviously he can't hear me. He never moves. Just continues to stand like a statue underneath his umbrella in the pouring rain.

The sound of my cell phone ringing from inside my purse startles me. Reaching inside, I fumble through the clutter until I feel its leather case. After a quick glance at the screen my heart dips. *Mom*.

Instead of answering, I send her to voice mail, then slam the gearshift back into park. My wipers are no match for the rain pounding against the windshield. I should get out right now and tell him while I still have the chance. I glance over my shoulder for an umbrella. But I remember leaving it propped up against the wall inside my front door.

Despite the downpour I get out of the car. With hands on either side of my mouth, I form a megaphone. "Carol," I shout over the top of my hood, feel the rain drenching like I'm underneath a waterfall. He doesn't turn around. "Carol!" I shout again, even louder.

This time he looks over his shoulder. When he sees me he stops, turns around. His smile has morphed into a grimace. "Get out of the rain, Mia. You'll get sick."

My heart is pounding. I duck back inside and pull straight up to his car, pinning him in. I press the button to roll down my passenger window. He leans in while the umbrella protects the rest of his body.

"Please get in," I say with pleading eyes. "There is something I need to tell you."

# THE SEEKER

## PAIGE CRUTCHER

### ekam (one)

The world is made up of patterns. It's an intricate system of grooved lines that intersect or don't, colors that blend or bleed, and paths that fork and leave you stalling or those which force you forward. My world is no longer made up of any recognizable pattern. Two months after my husband was accused of sexually assaulting my childhood friend, and the path isn't forked, it's fucked.

For the past two weeks I've been staring at the same sliver of Bahamian ocean, trying to think my way out of the present.

Swami Sivananda once said, "Eat sparingly. Breathe deeply. Talk kindly. Work energetically." The quote is engraved on the raised yoga dock outside my hut. So far, the eat sparingly and work energetically parts of the aphorism come easy. My stomach hasn't unknotted itself since the news showed up on my door, and work is what we do here at the Sivananda Ashram. From the moment I stepped off the boat onto the wooden dock, it's been hours of meditation in the Garden Hut followed by chanting, singing, and lectures. Not to mention the two-hour-long yoga classes.

There isn't much time to talk except during meals, and my thoughts are so

busy being engulfed in flames my mouth can't seem to find anything to say to my yoga brunch-mates.

When it comes to breathing, it doesn't matter how much pranayama the yogis with the reassuring eyes, who perform handstands the way most of us put one foot in front of the other, encourage. No matter how diligently I try to "inhale blessings," the best I do is suck at air like I'm trying to drink fudge through a straw.

It's 8 p.m. and I'm settled onto my corner of cold concrete floor for the second satsang of the day. The wind is whirling through the palm leaves, and I know I should be clearing my mind, but I can't stop sniffing myself. My karma yoga assignment is cleaning toilets and scrubbing floors, and after the second two-hour yoga session of the day, my pores are now emanating pure Pine-Sol.

There's rustling nearby, likely from one of the many fine-feathered friends residing on the island, and my thoughts shift to forcing my hands to stay on my knees instead of going to my hair to protect my scalp from being the latest target of wayward bird poop.

The pocket of hysteria bubbles up in my throat, and I think of her. If she were with me, she'd have the same thought. If she were here, one of us would giggle, the other would snort, and we'd end up crying from trying to bottle up our carbonated laughter. Then we'd throw in the towel on this god-forsaken palace of peace and swim back to Nassau for crab cakes and a barrel of wine.

I don't think of *him*, or wish he were here. My lizard brain points this out as a warm scream forms in my throat.

Bells chime, softly, and I relax my jaw. They chime again, and I wonder if someone forgot to silence their phone.

Twenty-five minutes. That's the length of time we have before the traditional chanting, singing, or dancing. Surely it's been fifteen minutes. Though yesterday I thought that, and then I spent another nine years in this spine-straightening, butt-numbing meditation posture.

Nine years. I was married to *him* for nine years. Am. Was. Will have been.

I should have known. Should have seen who he was. This is my fault. If I'd paid more attention, I could have prevented it from happening.

My stomach growls around the knots, and I shift back, trying to listen to my breathing. Every exhale sounds like *his* name, every inhale sounds like *hers*.

Three weeks ago, my new doctor was convincing me to take a vacation, get away, in hopes the daily panic attacks would lesson. It was fortuitous timing. That same day I received an email from a college friend who turned her life over to the practice of yoga and moved to Nassau.

*Come to the island, it will help you clear your mind and find your true self. You are not what's happening to [redacted] or [redacted]. You are more than these circumstances.*

My friend was waiting for me when I departed the plane. “You need a yoga session with the dolphins,” she said after scanning me head to toe, and tugged me down a long pier toward a large square dock. She led me through a yoga practice that started with twists and angles and ended in my unraveled tears. There were dolphins, I suppose, somewhere in the ocean, but I never saw one.

The next day, she put me on the boat for the ashram, and I’m no closer to finding my true self now than I was then.

I want to believe what *he* did wasn’t my fault, but isn’t that what everyone wishes when faced with tragedy? It happened to them because they do bad things, but it will never happen to me because I don’t (do those exact same bad things). You think he had a heart attack because he couldn’t give up fried chicken, or she got sick because she carried all those secrets and microwaved plastic food containers, ignoring all warning about toxic BPA. We justify tragedy when tragedy doesn’t need a reason.

*He* hated that I didn’t like to have sex on all fours.

I blow out a breath, try to re-center myself, but the thought won’t go away.

Being on all fours makes me claustrophobic. I can never see what’s happening behind me when my chin is dug into the silky damask blue of my pillowcase. The position is rough in an angry Discovery Channel way, never tender and delicious in the ways described in bodice-ripping romance novels.

Is that why? Was he so unfulfilled he took from someone I loved what I, the person who should have loved him enough to give him what he needed, wouldn’t give him?

“Talk kindly,” Swami Sivananda says, but the oceanic breeze only ushers in ugly thoughts and possibilities of why it all went wrong.

*He* called my nipples lazy. They've never responded like he expected, and over the last year he's bypassed them completely. I've seen her nipples before; they're hard to look away from when they're always at attention, like a porn star's or stripper's would be. If my nipples weren't genetically predisposed to indolence, would it have saved her?

What if she did it on purpose? She knows how he feels about my lack of good nipple gene. Maybe she thought she'd flash her perfect areolas his way at the neighborhood pool, flirt a little because he should be safe and she was feeling Gucci in her suit, and he flipped his switch.

The sweet whine of the singing bowl hovers in the air above us, and I squeeze my eyes tighter together. Shut. Shut. *Shut up, Mia. It wasn't her fault, and it wasn't your nipples. It was his predisposition to being an asshole.*

But he buys me peonies every third month on the same day, the third, because he knows how much I love the number three. When I was sick last May he took off from work for two days to lie in bed and watch scripted Bravo dramas with me on TV, make me scalding-hot miso soup, and rub my back until I fell asleep. He didn't complain once.

We were planning to try for children next month.

The call of the singing bowl grows louder. It reverberates through the air and sifts down into the marrow of my bones. The thoughts are harder to hear when its song is filling me up.

My breath comes easy now.

In. Out.

In. Out.

I press the tip of my tongue to the roof of my mouth as the tears leak their way down my cheeks. They are tracks of pain and betrayal, rivulets of loss. They are the wet pattern of a shattered heart.

I won't think the one thought an awful piece of me wishes were true.

What if it's not...

What if she's making...

No, I won't go there. Any form of doubt is betrayal of the worst kind.

There's a *crackle, clink, crunch* in the distance, followed by a clattering *clang*, and my eyes blink open.

The eyes of the red-headed woman to my left are closed, a serene smile

pressing the edges of her lips up. Across the way a blond woman lifts her chin like she's sunbathing in the starlight. Everyone in the small stone enclosure is deep in meditation, including the lead swami. Even his laugh lines look at peace, his eyes crinkled enough to let me know he's awake, but not so much that I believe he's bothered by any of the sounds around him.

I unfold myself from my lotus position, my knees popping and my psoas muscle aching in protest. Standing, I'm careful to walk as if I had cat paws instead of feet made for stomping.

Winding my way through the moonlit path, I try to stay present and take in the encouraging signs posted along the trail. Rumi admonishes me for acting so small, telling me I am the universe in ecstatic motion. Fuck you, Rumi. I am a crumpling galaxy in anxious orbit, and I've never felt more of a spotlight on my existence.

There's a smaller crash, and I stop at the entrance to the communal kitchen. A girl with beautifully browned skin stands in front of a long table. At her feet are two stainless steel pans and a bushel's worth of broken eggs. She glares at them like she can fry them with her mind.

"Need a hand?" My voice comes out sounding as broken as the scattered shells on the floor. I clear my throat, but the hoarse pinch only worsens.

"I need a maid, room service, and a hot Jacuzzi bath, but I'll settle for what I can get." She smiles as she says this, and it reaches her eyes.

We clean side by side, yolk covering us from knuckle to forearm, and she hums softly as we work. The song makes me ache. My throat tries to open so I can let loose the mourning deep down in my chest, but I clamp my teeth together. I don't deserve the release. I can't let it escape. I won't have anything left if I do.

When we finish she gives me another flash of a smile, her brown eyes holding gratitude. I bow my head in response, and she returns the gesture. She hums as she walks away, and I carry her tune with me back to my hut.

In the morning, I wake and take my turn in the shower, change the linens, and by 6 a.m., I am back on the cold concrete floor for the morning satsang. The girl from last night walks in and takes the seat to my right. There are bags under her eyes, and her hair looks like she slept with a bird nesting there, but she gives me a small smile and rolls her shoulders out with purpose.

I bet her nipples are youthful and exuberant. I look down at my chest, the swami rings the gong, and my eyes close. Today, I vow, I will not spend the next thirty minutes thinking about *him* or *her* or anyone's areolas.

Today's lecture is on the Bhagavad Gita and the four well-known paths to yoga. The message is on how external forces govern us, but the self is free. The girl from last night sniffs loudly. With a start, I realize everyone, including me, is in various states of crying...or beaming like the first ray of a rainbow. My cheeks are wet, and I wait to feel tired—because that's the only state I know—but the weight never comes.

We move on to our two-hour asana practice, and afterward I practically race to brunch. It doesn't matter that before coming here I hated sweet potatoes and chased down most of my vegetables with wine so I didn't have to taste them. Here, the food satisfies in a way I only knew as a child. The apples taste like summer, the potatoes fill me up like a fresh spring rain.

“How long have you been here?”

I didn't hear the girl sit down, and brush crumbs from my mouth as I reply. “Three weeks, give or take.”

She nods. Up close she has freckles sprinkled across her nose. Her eyes are somewhere between brown and hazel, and there's a stray freckle above her left eyebrow. She looks nothing like *her*, and yet, I can't help but think of *her*.

“It's my third day. I knew they were disciplined, but this schedule is next level,” she says.

“I've heard it gets easier.”

“When? Next May?”

My laugh is silent, but she grins at the response. Suddenly, like a summer storm arriving without any warning, the grin vanishes and her eyes fill. She pushes back from the table and races out of the room.

A lanky man two seats down watches her go, and looks over at me. “The first days are the hardest.”

He holds my gaze too long, and heat creeps up onto my shoulders, skittering down to my chest. When he finally breaks the connection, I turn my eyes to my plate and don't look up for the rest of the meal.

I move like a misplaced snail after the final satsang, inching my way forward, desperate for a home to rest my exoskeleton. My room is dark when I enter,

and when I flip on the lamp by the door my inhalation catches in my throat. Breathe deeply, Swami Sivananda said.

It's impossible to prana—anything when a stranger's in your bed.

## **Dve (two)**

She wakes as I'm watching her, stretching like taffy being pulled in two directions. Her toes curl before she springs up from the bed like a dancing marionette being pulled upright. My own limbs are weighted with enough worries to fill an emptied ocean.

“Sorry,” she says, rocking back on her heels. “I have vicious anxiety attacks, and I'd been wanting to talk to you, and then it got bad, and I thought I'd wait for you here, but I fell asleep because this schedule is like a Marine's on bad acid.”

I lower myself into the wicker chair by the door, not bothering to move the fresh towels to the side. “Is there good acid?”

“Depends on your definition,” she says, scrunching her forehead. “I'm Kayleigh, by the way.”

“Mia,” I say, unsure how to proceed, grateful her tear ducts are dry.

“I know.” She picks up the white porcelain singing bowl beside my bed, gingerly touching the leaves of the white-and-yellow elderflowers I filled it with two days ago. She takes a deep breath. “When I first arrived, the yogi told me I had more to give, and receive, and that I would be led to find my way.”

Outside the waves crash, perfunctory, against the beach, and two people pass by, their shadows peeking in the door. I catch snippets of the words inside their conversation as they go.

Kayleigh studies the white-and-yellow flowers like they contain worlds instead of pollen.

“I've been trying to manifest a reason to live,” she says, setting the bowl down with a thunk. “For two days I've watched you, and after last night I realized you're the person who can help.”

A hard knot coils tighter in my belly, and I try to breathe around the irony. “Kayleigh, I'm flattered—”

She holds up a hand, her long graceful fingers tapping at the air. “I'm hanging by a thread, Mia. Please don't cut me down.”

Shit. I have nothing to give. There is nothing for me to receive.

And yet. Her face is a rough but detailed sketch of earnest. Maybe this girl, this young and lovely and lost girl, is my penance.

“It’s late,” I say.

She nods. “You’re right. We can talk more in the morning.” Her hand reaches out, grasps mine. “Thank you, Mia.”

After she’s gone I stay seated in the chair, watching shadows of the leaves from the palm trees and oaks mingle and shake from my view beside the door. Like Plato before me, I am living in my own allegory, my own cave—or cage. Now, it seems, someone else wants to enter.

In the morning, as I approach the Garden Hut, I hear soft footsteps from a secondary path and pause, expecting Kayleigh to magically appear. Instead I come face-to-face with the man from brunch. His hair is the kind of black they teach you about in school. It’s not the absence of color, but the combination of all the colors come together to form something different. His eyes are a deep blue, and they’re submarine serious in comparison to the tune he whistles.

“‘Yellow Submarine’?” I ask, a twinge of delighted surprise unrooting from the base of my spine.

He gives me a nod, and a hint of a smile tugs on a corner of his full lips. He enters the stone enclosure, and my delight turns to shame before it shifts to something darker.

I *smiled* at him. I can’t be smiling. I’m married. I’m a martyr.

My feet stumble over the last thought. I’m a martyr?

My legs are broken rubber bands, and I crumple into the seated position on the floor. My spine sags like a deflated paper bag. My heart races. My thoughts whirl.

The slow call of the gong rises, and my eyes close. Like Pavlov’s pup, my jaw relaxes on command.

Outside, the sun is peeking hello, testing out the world, deciding if it will rise on us for another day. The waves crest against the sand, stealing pebbles from the shore, carrying them away from where they’ve nestled. Where do they go? Are they secreted by the tide to a hidden realm where underwater beings grow them from grains into pearls and lodge them into oysters in hopes

of luring us out further to sea?

I'm drowning in my thoughts.

Drowning...

Then I'm underwater, facing *her*, trying to look anywhere but at the pain on her open, expressive face. Seeing her as she was the day she rang the bell at the front door. She didn't bother to use the key like always, she ignored the rock it hid beneath, unearthing instead a secret I would spend the next days trying to think of a way to give back.

*I said no, Mia. I said no and he didn't stop.*

Hands bound, eyes closed, tears pouring like blood from a gaping wound.

I do not know if that is how it happened. I only know that's how I see *her* when I picture it. Prey and predator, hunt and attack.

It's nothing like how *his* hands felt when he'd run them down my calves like he was worshipping at the altar of my temple. How he'd spend hours undressing me with his eyes, even after nine years.

It is everything wrong.

The piercing call of a tropical bird cuts through the room, and my shoulders tighten. The normally quiet bird's rage blends into my own.

"Do not let the chaos of the outer world distract you from the peace of your inner world," the Swami says.

Inhale. Exhale.

Inhale. Exhale.

When the lecture on finding your true self arrives, it provides little relief. My true self is still a buried myth.

The day's asanas punish my body and torture my mind, as my thoughts refuse to quiet.

Brunch brings nourishment, but my lips tremble when I try to eat.

"I feel wrung out," Kayleigh says, sliding into the seat across from me.

Her skin shines, and she performs a few quick arm stretches like a gymnast cooling down. Wrung out is the opposite of how she appears. She glows, while I ignore the sweat pooling at my back and take a deep sip of water.

"About your manifestation," I say, pausing to set the cup down.

"I don't have anything to give," she says, pressing a finger to her brow, smoothing down the line of fine hair. "The dude got it wrong. I have nothing

left.”

My throat burns, and I try to swallow. “Maybe this is the land of everything,” I say, voicing a secret—one I carried when I first arrived. “Maybe your time here will open the doors you need.”

“That’s a bunch of swami bullshit, and you know it.”

I cough a laugh into my shoulder, and she picks up her fork and begins shoveling in rice.

“Face it, Mia, no one knows what they’re talking about. My therapist sent me here as a way to keep me from overdosing on benzodiazepines and tequila. After two hours at the ashram I realized she googled ‘yoga healing retreats’ or something equally new age and presented it to me like a magician plucking feathers from a hat. You know the problem with that? She should have presented me with the whole bird. But the dove is dead, and the feathers are the smoke screen.”

Kayleigh smirks at the gobsmacked expression I can’t keep off my face. “I only understood a third of what you just said.”

“Let’s blame the bad acid, shall we?”

I spear a sliver of zucchini, and force it down. “I am nobody’s guru.”

“Don’t need a guru, and you’re my person. I told you, I felt it. The universe told me.”

She shrugs, and irritation flames into anger. I didn’t ask the universe to give her to me. I didn’t ask to be a mentor or for this kind of penance. I’m not a good friend. I’m not a good anything. This, at least, has been established.

“My girlfriend is dead.” She delivers the line like a fishmonger dropping a pound of tuna on the scale. It lands in my hands, and I desperately want to hot potato it back to her.

Her blink is so slow it’s judging me. “She was everything, now I have nothing.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, when my voice comes back to me. “That’s unimaginably awful.”

“*Awful* is a polite word for what it is. It’s a rotting decay of tragedy that lives inside my marrow. I can’t pull it out. I can’t let it go. If I could, I would meditate every day under a Bodhi tree from now until the end of time just for this nothingness to leave me. I’m supposed to follow the universe, and I am.

Hello, universe.”

Around us is the steady hum of conversation. Glasses clink, forks clatter, elbows and hands smack into plates and against the table. I look over and see the raven-haired man leaning into the jamb of the door. He’s watching me, not even bothering to pretend he isn’t, and I flush from forehead to elbow.

“Why do you think I can help you?”

“You’re doing it,” she says.

“Doing what?”

“It. Finding your higher power, following the path.” She leans forward, and there’s a beautiful and greedy light to her eyes. “I’ve seen it. You understand the readings, you don’t take notes or look confused, you absorb it like a super-sponge. I can’t feel it, can’t touch the light. You can.”

“Rumi said what you are seeking is seeking you,” I say, my words coming fast, because part of me wishes I could be the person she’s described, the person I used to think I was. Even as I know she’s wrong and I’m the one with nothing to offer. “What are you seeking, Kayleigh?”

She breathes in deeply through her nose. “I told you, I’m seeking a reason to live. What else is there?”

### **Treeni (three)**

People turn to yoga because they are looking for change, or so Swami teaches us. For the next week Kayleigh is microfiber to my Velcro, and I spend my days listening to her heartbreak when I’m not coaxing my body into postures that transform my muscles but don’t reach my heart.

I’ve never tried to keep someone alive before. With Kayleigh, I discover it isn’t about living or dying, it’s about being heard. The pain is eating her from somewhere behind her sternum, a little monster of loss chewing on her soul.

She’s taken to saying a simple offering before brunch every day. *Hello, Creator, there is a crack in everything, please let my light in.*

It’s a small measure of kindness on my part to listen, and a largely selfish one because her heartbreak is a welcome distraction from my own.

I cross paths with the black-haired man most mornings on the way to or from our satsangs. We do not speak, but his eyes crinkle around the edges when we pass. Every time they do, a fire down deep inside me sputters in an attempt to start. I clench it out and pretend I don’t imagine the night wind

blowing across his upper arms and thighs, and how cool that skin tastes, before I fall asleep.

On good nights I'm treated to the deep slumber of an inactive volcano, and on bad ones I slip in the spurt of mental lava seeping out, riding the pain of losing *him* and *her*.

I thought my life was one thing, but I was wrong. I lived an illusion, a pretty one with a wooden picket fence, two-car garage, robin's-egg-blue door with matching shutters, thriving but small group of friends and the promise of motherhood to come. I spent months planning for my future, while the present was weaving a different one born of spikes and chains. I couldn't see what wasn't real until it smacked me in the face. I've been under the influence of illusion for too long, but I'm learning to breathe, and I'm trying to change.

We're sitting in the hammocks, the day coming to a close, Kayleigh's toes drawing empty rivers in the sand. "What are you doing next?" she asks.

"Next?" I look up at the moon. "Next, I'll go to bed."

"No." She laughs her full throaty laugh. "Man, you really do live in the present moment. I mean after the ashram. Like, where's your real life? Who are your people? You never talk about yourself."

Every day I live inside my head, trapped in the past, shredding my insides trying to get out.

"I don't have any people." It's true enough that the words leave me cold. "I haven't given a lot of thought to what I'll do next, I guess."

Kayleigh plops back into the hammock, toes still dragging across the pinkish-white sand. "That sounds so evolved."

"I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm just trying not to drown." Her head shifts so she can see me, and I climb out of the sunken seat.

"Drowning by breath," she says, and I can't tell if she's taking my words as seriously as I take hers. "It sounds like quite the way to go."

The next day's yoga lecture is on gratitude and compassion, and I lean in as the swami talks.

"We all live by our perception," he says, sitting in the lotus position, his posture perfection, his expression gentle. "We are in the company of truth when we are together, and this is why we satsang. Meditation alone is good for cleansing thoughts and calming our monkey minds, while together it is

power. When we join together, we open, shifting to purify our thoughts. How do you perceive your reality? Are you grateful for the truth? Today I am grateful for you. We walk together in unity and in diversity. We are all different, and we are all going through something. Look to the person to your left, your right. You never know what the person next to you is experiencing, what pain they carry. Together we remove the barriers for our spiritual growth and lift up those beside us.”

His words are as pretty as a museum-bound Renoir, and I try to breathe them in, stuff them down into the tear inside my soul.

When we leave the satsang, Kayleigh stays behind. I see her go to the swami, her head bowed, tears glistening in the corner of her eyes.

I do not go to the yoga practice. For the first time in a month, I wander instead to the ocean. People preferring the natural experience to a room or a hut sleep on the beach, and tents are erected a tenth of a mile up. I watch the door of a navy-and-white tent as it flaps in the wind, unpinned, unguarded.

My perception of reality is expanding, but I don't know into what. The sign at the start of the walk from the beach into the ashram reads: *A Special Place for Cleansing*.

Under bare feet, the sand hugs my arches, its silken grains gathering and shifting with each step I take. The sand is not trying to cling. It simply lets go. Everything in the universe can be framed to holding on and letting go. My nails pinch crescents into my palms, and I try to relax my fingers. Stepping to the water's edge, I give in to closing my eyes. Beneath my feet the sand is firm. The first wave kisses my toes and ankles, and the sand shifts. It is pulled away from the shore, spirited out from underneath my soles. It's a heady feeling, like the world is a rug and someone is gently trying to tug it free.

A voice clears, and I look back. Swami Ahimsa is standing two feet back, over my shoulder. His feet are as bare as his chest.

“Hello, Mia.”

Swami doesn't seek people out, because people seek him. I wonder if that is the precedent the original guru, Swami Sivananda, set when he founded the ashram, or if the swamis want to give us peace—and not interfere. I ask him, and he smiles with teeth. It startles me how much younger he looks, how normal, when he grins.

“We start our days at four and end them at ten. It has to do with a deep desire for sleep and a good book. I find both are a deserving reward at the end of any day.”

My laugh is garbled by the ocean’s breeze. He studies me and takes a step forward. We stand side by side, the ocean pulling grains from under us as we face an endless horizon.

“It’s easy to see why sailors once thought the world was flat,” I say of the edge of the world in front of us. It looks like someone took a ruler to the sea and the sky, dividing them with straight-edge precision.

“Sailors spent months to years traversing the water,” he says, his tone as mild as if he’s leading a meditation into the Akashic Realm. “I believe they must have known the world was round, for they never reached an edge. People on the shore, however...” I feel his smile in his next words: “That’s a dog of a different breed.”

“You’re talking about perception again,” I say, thinking of my life off the island, of Kayleigh and her grief, of the way the sun seems to sparkle on the water like diamonds waiting beneath the surface.

“Life is perception. I suppose I am always talking about it in some form. Life is also gratitude. I am grateful you came here, and I am wondering if you would like to stay longer.”

The ashram doesn’t have rules in the way the rest of the world does. Karmic yogis, yogis who stay on and serve the retreat in exchange for room and board, and growing their education, run the ashram.

“Can you define what you’re asking?” I ask, my heart skipping a beat at the thought, fear shifting the words so I can’t tell if I’m misinterpreting the offer.

“Would you like to stay on longer? It’s a simple question for me, the answer I hope may be simple for you.”

I smile at the almost riddle.

“Think on it, sleep on it, and let me know.” He looks out to the ocean and closes his eyes. When the next wave hits, I watch the childlike delight steal over his face as the sand tugs gently from beneath his feet and is swept back into the ocean.

“The water does not discriminate,” he says, opening his eyes. “It’s a nice reminder that life happens to us all. Whether the incidents in it happen to you

or for you, well, that's entirely up to your perception, isn't it?"

I make it to brunch, chewing on his words like they're a twig from the *Salvadora persica* tree and can cleanse the murkiest part of me. My table is empty, no Kayleigh in sight, and I sit with a cup of green tea and my thoughts for company.

The Clash's "Should I Stay or Should I Go" runs in a loop through my mind. The song feels oddly un-yogic, and absolutely right.

*What are you doing next?* Kayleigh asked me. I've been on this island for four weeks, and only one person knows I am here. My life at home is frozen in amber. Things are happening, they must be, but because I'm not there to witness them, they aren't happening to me.

What do I owe?

Allegiance to *her*? Punishment to *him*?

What do I want?

I lean back in the chair and take a slow breath. That's the question I've avoided asking.

Kayleigh enters, sees me, and grins. There is a slight lift to her step. Her shoulders still carry anvils of sorrow, but something is shifting. I watch her wave to a couple at a table by the door as she goes to make her plate.

I want a divorce. In my heart, the divorce is done, but I need to file—I need to rip off the Band-Aid, and let the wound heal.

Weight settles in next to me, and I look over to see the man with the black hair. He smiles and takes a sip of his water. His chin ducks, and I notice a white scar rippled along his jaw. He doesn't speak, but his presence warms me like heat from a stove. I want to know his name.

My breath catches in my chest.

I want to apologize again to *her*, to tell her I love her, this wasn't her fault, and I'm sorry. I want to be a suture along the edge of *her* wound.

Kayleigh sits down across from me, waggling her brows at the raven-haired man, before digging in to her own food.

My breath loosens.

Like before, at the water's edge, I close my eyes.

Divorce. Apology. Two things I can do, or get started, without taking a step out of *this* reality. There's outgoing mail on the island, and a letter is a start on

both counts.

Behind my eyes, light flickers. Soft blue and pink, deep red and bright white. Patterns show up even here, though their form is deconstructed. Lines blur and focus, shapes and outlines and figurations hover in front of me, waiting to take shape.

The world is made up of patterns, and people come to yoga because they are seeking change. My path is waiting, right in front of me.

Stay or go?

Kayleigh says something to the man next to me, her voice a low and happy hum. He shifts, and his elbow brushes mine. Purpose and peace, loss and mourning, they shouldn't fit together in the same space, and yet somehow they do.

My mind finds the right pattern, the way forward.

Taking a deep and cleansing breath that fills my lungs all the way down into its basin, I decide.

With a smile, I open my eyes.

# THE SINGER/SONGWRITER

PATTI CALLAHAN HENRY

**W**E TELL OUR LIVES IN lyric. That's what songwriters do; it's what I am set to do in a few hours.

All my known life I've waited for this day and more specifically this moment, and yet here I stand, immobile and indecisive, fear unspooling inside me. My guitar with the thick leather strap emblazoned with my name—Mia—in bright red is slung over my shoulder. My left hand rests on the top of the guitar's smooth surface, and my right absently runs across the strings as if soothing a lover, not to produce sound but to just sense the strings.

The world has fulfilled my lifelong wish, and now the stage glows with spotlights spilling onto the scratched hardwood floors of the Ryman Auditorium like neon puddles. The auditorium is empty but for the workers and crew setting up, the echoing sounds of equipment being moved and voices calling out. Everyone else—the guitar players, the sound engineers, the drummers, managers, and backup singers—is in the dressing rooms having a beer, pacing while humming the songs, or more likely flirting. I stand alone on the empty stage.

*There's only one first time.*

I've heard this over and over in the past weeks since I've been invited to sing my new hit live onstage during a showcase at the legendary country music hall. The Ryman was once a church, and the original pews faced the stage, staunchly proud in curved rows. I sense the sanctity of the place: the ancient wood; the scrollwork on the balcony apron recently uncovered after layers of paint had been removed; the scent of mildew as subtle as perfume; the memorial echoes of Minnie Pearl and Jimmy Dickens, of Earl Scruggs and Johnny Cash. Even if no one told me it used to be a church, I would have guessed, or maybe imagined it to be so and eventually even written a song about that. Maybe I still will.

It seems all I can do lately—write songs *about* my life instead of *living* my life. There is nothing left, or so it seems, to live for except to write about the things that have already happened and are worth the music and the lyrics they offer me. The past can be written about, while the future is as bleak as a night without moon or stars. I questioned, more times than can be counted, whether I've been living the right life at all, heartbreak clouding all my choices and turning them into unbridled mistakes.

That's what the song, the "big hit," is about—the choices I've made that have slammed me into the middle of the *wrong* life. The song's title, "Ruins," says it all, with the chorus a four-line lament of how the ruins and remains of my love story are the only things left worth singing about.

Damn, people do love a sad song. All the songs I've penned with my Gibson over my shoulder and a beer by my side, with friends chiming in with lyrics and ideas about love and life and living for the day? Well, those have been all fine and good or a few concerts. But this sad song shot to the top. Obviously, a few people understood the horror of realizing that the good stuff might have already happened, and mostly missed in the chaos of living too fast with too much.

The audience won't see me as I look now in my sweatpants and white T-shirt sporting the logo of my last (failed) album. They will see me in a long red dress, my hair curled and piled and sprayed. My eyes will be so thick with silver makeup and black lashes that it will feel like I'd attached wings to my eyelids. But for now, I face the looming decision of whether to sing the second song, the one that might destroy me.

I stare out over the empty pews. Would he even come to hear me? Would he bother with that?

Red is more famous than I am by a thousand light-years, a star so bright that no matter how I polish my own meager celestial light, I will never compete. But I hadn't wanted to compete; I'd only wanted to find my own place in the country music world, to have my songs resonate with those who loved them, not with his beer-drinking pickup-truck song buddies (as fun and lucrative and dance-worthy as those songs were and are).

Red Shea. He was wrapped up in a package so astoundingly like my imagination that I'd started to believe in all the gurus who professed the belief that we manifest our futures. I had loved him immediately. But I'm not the only one. Every girl or woman who spies him on an album cover or onstage or grinning from below his cowboy hat loves him. The day we met is as etched as the initials on my childhood kitchen table where I sat up one night and used Dad's pocketknife, the one I'd pilfered from Mom's dresser drawer.

The fund-raising concert had been for a conservation company that provided tours for young children, and Red had been the headliner. I'd been the opening singer for the opening band: the one who plays while no one pays any mind. I was the background white noise to keep the crowd from getting restless before the whiskey flooded their veins and Red jumped up with a holler. The after-party had been at his house, a sprawling timber-and-brick estate on ten acres outside Nashville. I'd stood by the kitchen island, and it *was* an island, a slab of black slate so large a king-size bed wouldn't cover it.

"You did a great job tonight, Missy," he said as he approached me, his outline seeming to not so much move through the empty space between us but shove the emptiness aside. His cowboy hat was gone, and a baseball cap for the Atlanta Braves had taken its place.

"Oh, my name isn't Missy. It's Mia."

He threw back his head as if someone had grabbed his hair and pulled with great force, and a bellow erupted. "Of course it is. I was just being formal."

"Oh. Oh, I get it. Sorry." I cringed, and I would have backed away in embarrassment but for the slab of slate digging into my spine.

"Did you make up that name because it sounds like the perfect country music stage name?" He came closer and I smelled the tobacco tucked into his

cheek.

“Nope. It’s my given name. Who I am.”

“Now there’s a good song title.” He sidled up next to me and set his beer on the slate.

“Who I am?”

“No. *My given name*. I like that.”

“Well, you’re more than welcome to it,” I said even as I started to think that he wasn’t more than welcome to it; that it was *my* words he’d taken straight out of my mouth.

We stood there for another hour, talking like that, so easily and warmly, our ideas bouncing back and forth like we’d been practicing word volleys for all of our known lives. I left at daybreak and knew it would be the last time I spoke to Red Shea in a way that any girl would pay for.

But it wasn’t. I hadn’t even arrived home, blurry-eyed and stumbling into my bed that was smaller than his kitchen island, when he’d texted and asked if I’d please join him for dinner the following day, “which is already today,” he wrote.

I waited to answer; I didn’t want to seem too ready and eager. I waited about two minutes.

For two years, from that first dinner until three months ago, we weren’t apart for more than a few hours. My heart was as full as hearts get when love finds its way inside and crowds out everything else, when desire fills up the crevices and corners and small areas inside that you’d thought arid and dry. We weren’t a combo name, *RedMia* or something damn stupid like that, but my name, previously unknown, was linked with his in the same breath, and my songs started to find airtime. I didn’t care who knew he loved me; I honestly didn’t, as long as *I* knew he loved me, which I did.

Maybe love, when consumed too quickly and too eagerly, is emptied out or used up, wasted in haste. Red and I might have devoured what little love we were allotted during this lifetime in that short time, where others might have been able to make it last for decades. Maybe we are, as couples, apportioned only so much love, and we decide how fast to use it up. Or maybe I wasn’t good enough for him, and it was natural and inevitable that he would fall for someone else.

After an all-night party with his buddies, he came to me in our bed, the sheets wrinkled with my solo sleep, to tell me about his new love. At least I didn't have to read about it in the rags around town. But I'd set myself up. If you're going to take the publicity for the love, you have to take it for the loss. You can't have it only one way. I can't ask for privacy now when we never asked for it when they followed our love story from the get-go.

I hadn't seen it coming.

Most don't.

The songs came quickly in the pain. Lyric and melody were the only things I could feel or hear in the days and months following the breakup. The grief, like panic, flooded over me in waves, drowning me and then letting me go, tossing me to the hard shoreline of loneliness. Anxiety grabbed me and then squeezed the air from my lungs and my body before slinking off like the coward it was and is. But the songs? They were an anchor and ballast; they were a vessel that held all the pain.

It was the song, "Ruins," that shot to the top. But I would trade the song, give it back to the muse, forever remain the opening act for the opening act not to feel the pain that birthed that ballad.

Instead of turning to another man, I turned to my guitar.

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I found my first guitar on the day my father died. I was twelve years old and the world held its breath, threatening to never take another. I walked in that molasses of loss, my mother drunk enough to sleep through most of the grief and madness, except when she wasn't and I bore the brunt of her grief and anger, equally mixed and equally volatile. In those times, I'd run from the house filled with casseroles and vodka and unwashed dishes, which were piled in the sink, across countertops, and covered in ants.

I found myself at Shari's house, weeping in my best friend's all-pink bedroom with a *SuperTeen* Leonardo DiCaprio poster staring down at me, when her brother walked in with a guitar slung over his shoulder like he was a fifteen-year-old Johnny Cash. He sat next to me, denting the side of the lime-green beanbag chair where I was curled into a ball, and I fell in love. Not with him. Not even close. But with the Gibson he held as close as a lover.

When someone or something saves your life, you quite possibly value it

more than you should. You value it enough to sacrifice everything else in your life for it. You value it enough to place the blinders of love on either side of your eyes and set your gaze forward with the object in front of you like a talisman. I wrote my first song that night, a song about my dad and the undoing of the world and the bleakness of not having a hero in your corner any longer. Shari's brother, his name long lost to me now, wrote the music as the lyrics flowed from me like the geyser only anguish can unleash.

That next week I pawned everything I could find in my mother's house to scrape together enough to buy my own Gibson at the same pawnshop where I took the things she never missed, or thought were stolen by one of the many men she later brought home.

Four hundred and thirty songs. That is how many I've written in the days that led to this night where I stand stunned on the Ryman stage. But not one of them have I ever been afraid to sing.

Until now.

"Yo, Mia, we need your final song list." A voice echoes across the stage, flowing down into the front row, where the dignitaries will sit tonight. And where Red will sit if he wants to, if he decides to come.

"I know," I answer the voice, which I know is Bill Kennedy, but I can't see him from behind the boxes where he stands calling out to me. "I'm deciding right now."

"What's to decide?" He comes into the light, joins me in the neon puddle. His baseball cap is slung low on his forehead and emblazoned with the Nashville Predators logo, and otherwise he's immaculately dressed. He's my manager, the one I'd obtained when Red "gave" him to me. I thought he'd run when Red did, but Bill explained that that's not his way of doing business. He was with me because of my talent, not because Red referred him. But still I wait for the notice, every day thinking he'll tell me it's time for him to move on to someone who isn't as erratic and squirrely as I've been the past three months.

"Bill." I face him. "Here's what's to decide—if I sing *that* song or not. The other song, the one after 'Ruins.' Red asked me not to sing it. No, actually he demanded that I don't sing it."

"And why is that, Mia?" Bill lifts his ball cap and runs his hands through his

thick, dark hair.

“Because he knows everyone will know it’s about him, and it doesn’t paint him in the nicest way. That’s why.”

“Well, maybe he should have thought about that when he did what he did. If he wanted nicer songs written about him, then he should’ve been nicer.”

The spotlight swings to the left as the lighting crew checks the range of movement. Bill and I stand in the dusty dimness.

“Mia.” He takes a breath and reaches his hand forward, almost touching me but then withdrawing. It’s a tender movement, one I’ve seen before many times over the past months. He wants to help; everyone does but no one knows how. “You sing what you want to sing. You sing what you feel led to sing. This is the Ryman. This is your chance. For once, this isn’t about Red. It’s about you.”

“But he begged me.” My throat clogs with that cottony feeling as if it is closing up, as if my voice will be stopped just as it tries to exit. The therapist I’ve found, she said it was panic and pain that only *felt* like cotton, and when I cried, or sang or spoke, it would dissipate. Good to know, but not helpful in the moment.

“And?” he asks.

I hear Bill’s point even though he hasn’t said it. I’d embarrassingly begged Red to let me stay, but instead he’d moved me to a lovely little cottage in the Twelfth Street district and he’d moved the new love into his house, a woman ten years younger than me, twenty years younger than him, and as adorable as a babysitter might be if we’d had a family, which thank God we hadn’t. He’d talked me out of that. *We were all we needed*, he’d said. Until he needed her.

So what Bill’s simple “And?” meant is “So what?” You begged him, and what the hell good did that do you? It didn’t change anything.

I try another excuse. “He could sue me.”

“No, he couldn’t.” Bill takes my hands in such a tender motion, in such a sweet way. He’s never touched me in any other way than a hug hello in a crowded room. We’ve shared buses and tight spaces and traveled and slept on a couch in a studio sound room, but never once has he taken my hands in his. “You must sing what is true for you. Why do you think that your songs have been roaring up the charts lately?”

“Because you’re my manager and because I was part of the Red world where magic falls like pixie dust on anyone near him.”

“No, Mia. No.” He still holds my hands, and now his fingers are wound tightly through mine. He pulls me closer so I see brown flecks in his green eyes, like freckles. I think how that might make a good lyric, the freckles of his eyes. And then I almost laugh. I can’t get out of my own way to even be close to someone who cares, already writing a song about a moment that hasn’t even passed.

“It’s your lyrics. It’s your voice. It’s the way people feel as though they have been let into a world they understand but nobody has opened the door for them before. It’s because you have a talent that is now being recognized.”

I should pull away. We are too close. But instead I relax into the closeness; I have flinched from human touch for so long.

“I’m scared to death, Bill. His anger isn’t something I can deal with. It never has been. Maybe that’s been the problem all along—I’m too weak.”

“You are far from weak, and that song is meant for every broken heart. Why would you keep it to yourself?”

With that, someone calls his name, and he releases my hands and turns to the question that sounds far off but is only a few feet away. Then he’s gone and I’m again alone on the stage.

*For every broken heart,* he said.

Could that be true?

The song had been wrought from the blazing fire of pain in an all-night writing session alone in the new house Red had bought for me as some kind of consolation prize. It was a house I hadn’t turned down because I needed a place to go and it was wonderful and warm and had a porch that spread across the front like a welcoming mat. I’d been bribed, consoled, and appeased. I’d accepted it because I’d needed it. “Consolation”—that’s the name of the song I’d written that night.

So very many things he gave me were meant to be consoling—the apologies, the platitudes, the free house, the looks of pity and regret. But consolation was only found in the daily living, only found in the depths of one’s soul, only discovered in the surviving. Consolation could not be given by the one who had done the breaking; it could only be found inside the one who’d been

broken.

I wrote about *that*.

Would I sing it tonight? The image of him arriving at my house with his warning returned.

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He strode to the front door, up the bluestone pathway, his blue pickup truck with the oversized tires parked at the curb. I saw him from the kitchen window and shut my eyes as if I could make him go away by pretending he wasn't there at all. But his image was an afterburn behind my lids: his long stride, his sunglasses hiding his eyes and reflecting the afternoon rays. And of course, his truck with the girl in the passenger seat, the girl I'd never met but knew her face as well as one can when they've seen it in gossip magazines and country music rags around town. Sissy Muldoon. Her name as real as her red hair (which was to say not real at all). He'd left her in the car like a dog, with the window cracked. The doorbell rang like the chimes of a church tower clock.

I opened my eyes and stood fast. I would ignore him. I would not answer. What the hell was he doing here anyway?

With a *click* and *snap*, the lock released itself, and the creaking of the hinges told me Red had let himself in the house. Guess he'd kept a key when he'd given me mine. This was enough to set me in motion, to send me bursting into the foyer from the kitchen's swinging door. "You can't just walk in here."

He didn't startle but stared at me as calmly as if I'd been there all along. Unflappable. Steady. Standing next to my red wool coat, which was hanging on a peg, my black Converse under the bench and my straw purse gaping open. "You're right, darling. You're right. I'm sorry. But I knew you were home."

"And you can't call me darling."

He smiled, and I knew what was coming. He was going to break out into song, which he did. "You don't have to call me darling, darling..." He began to belt out the David Allen Coe song.

"Not funny, Red. What are you doing here? What do you need?" I stood still as I could, tried not to fidget and run my hands through my hair, or tuck

my T-shirt into my jeans in some pitiful attempt to appear prettier or more put together.

He took off his baseball cap and set it next to my purse on the wooden bench, just as if he lived there, just as he'd done in the front entranceway to his house when we'd walk in. It sent a shiver of pain through my chest—the familiarity too awful and close. He ran his hand through his hair and lifted his gaze to mine. I didn't flinch. I didn't look away.

“Well, I realized that I left my songbook, maybe in your guitar case? I've been racking my brain trying to remember where I put it, and, well...I need it. I've been texting and calling you...”

“I blocked your number,” I lied. I saw every text and phone call that came through. I needed to know if and when he tried to contact me. I'd just opted out of answering.

“I assumed. So damn sorry to just show up like this, but I need it.”

“I don't think it's there, Red. I think you're looking for a reason to see me.” I nodded toward the ajar front door to the view of his truck and his girlfriend leaning out the window. “Didn't want to invite Sissy in?”

“Don't be cruel, it's not your style.”

“No, that's *your* style.”

Red reached over and shut the door. “Please don't. I just want my songbook. There are a couple of songs in there I can't seem to re-create, like that one we wrote together about Asheville.”

“The one about how our love was like the river, and the destination wasn't ours to know? That one we wrote when you were already sleeping with fake-name Sissy?”

Red had the decency to look away, so I had time to stare at him without meeting his eyes. He was thinner, his countenance showing a lack of sleep and peace. I knew every curve of his face, and how the contours changed when he'd been drinking too much, sleeping too little, holding on too tightly. I didn't have to torture him; he was doing just fine all by himself.

I took a breath. “Sorry, Red. Let's go look.”

He followed me through the house he'd bought me. “You've done a mighty fine job with this place. You always have such a nice...aesthetic, always knowing where something will look just right.”

“Thank you.”

Once in the kitchen, I lifted my leather song satchel, bulging with notes and Post-its, a notebook with tabs and half-formed ideas. I dumped the contents onto the wooden breakfast table as a shaft of sunlight burst into the room, arrowing between us.

“See? It’s not here. And it’s not in my guitar case.”

“Damn.” He sank onto a kitchen chair covered in a sweet floral print I’d found at the local thrift shop. “I have no idea where it is.”

“I bet it’s in your top left drawer. I think you put it there during that party last month when you thought Craig was snooping for songs.” I brushed my hand across the papers on the table. “It’s not here.”

“Holy shit. You’re right.” He looked up and his face brightened. “I totally forgot about that.” He flipped through the papers on the table, and I bristled, feeling the fine hairs on my neck come to attention. He picked up the one sheet I would have hidden if I’d thought about it—“Consolation.”

He read it before I could react, before I could find my voice or shoot my hand across the space between us, through the sunlight and through time. It was written on unlined paper, unmoored from the rest of my notebook.

“Sing it,” he said with his teeth slammed tight, the words hissing out between his lips.

“Hell no.” I walked a few feet from him and motioned toward the front of the house. “You have someone waiting for you, and my songs aren’t any of your concern now.”

“This is about me.” He waved the paper in the air, violently, and then slammed it onto the table. “Sing it to me. Don’t be a coward and write about me and then play it for the world before you play it for me.”

“A coward?” He knew when to prick the bubble of my pride, where to prod against my damaged courage. I rushed to the far corner and picked up my guitar, ran my hand over its curves and lines. I tossed the leather strap with my name emblazoned in bright red, the one he’d had made for me, over my shoulder. Without once looking at the scrap of paper, I sang the song I already knew by heart, the song I’d already sung for Bill, the song he was trying to peddle to Sony Records just the day before.

My voice didn’t waver. The lyrics and the melody grew stronger than me

into something far greater than merely the words and music combined. My voice found its pitch and rise as Red stared at me and the song filled the room. Resonant, the chorus arrived clear and pointed, and although I never met his gaze I never stopped singing.

When I finished, I set the guitar in the corner and pointed to the door. I was out of words; there was nothing left to say now, and the shaking began as the adrenaline had nowhere to go now that the song was over.

His face blanched white, and his eyes were red with unshed tears I knew he wouldn't show, at least not in front of me. He would cry eventually—I'd watched it happen when he didn't know I could see him, when he was alone and halfway through a bottle of whiskey.

Red stood and we faced each other. I could smell his chewing tobacco, a familiar and once sweet aroma. "If you sing that song in public, I will take this house away from you. You'll be shamed. I will make sure you don't have a career to salvage."

"What?" It was a stupid thing to say, but I didn't understand him; I didn't understand what he *actually* meant although he could not have been more clear.

"You heard me perfectly well." He took three steps toward me, and for the first time since we'd met, his size and presence became menacing instead of comforting. His face turned red, the blood returning with anger. "If you sing that song, everyone will know it is me. They will...know."

"Probably."

"I have a reputation, Mia. You damn well know that, and not as an asshole, which this song obviously makes me. You can do more damage with that song than with any tabloid story you might tell. I sound...horrific. They will all know it's me—and you've used my words against me. Those were private conversations, not for public consumption."

"Well, Sissy has damn sure been for public consumption. The song tells the truth."

"Don't do it."

"Leave."

And he did leave, but not before taking the white piece of paper with the lyrics and tearing it to shreds, so small and torn apart that even hours of taping

and gluing could not have put them back together. He threw the scraps on the floor and ground them with the heel of his boot.

When the front door slammed shut, I waited for the shaking, for the panic attacks I had come to expect, the slow crawl of gooseflesh and then the sensation that I couldn't breathe. I waited, but it didn't happen. So I sat down and wrote the lyrics again, this time in my notebook, where it gathered together with all the other songs of my life, where it joined them in the place it belonged.

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A thundering boom, a falling of something large, a gunshot, a collapsed balcony. I don't know what the sound is, but it startles me out of the reverie, jerks me from the memory that leaves me with a hammering heart that has just as much to do with the intrusive noise as the memory itself. I jump back, trip on the cords that snake across the Ryman stage, and land on my bottom. "What the hell was that?"

Cursing in all voices and accents flows from backstage. I stumble to my feet and run behind the partition to find Bill staring over a drum set that has crumpled from a dolly into a heap of shattered and misplaced parts. Colton, the drummer, stands over the mess with his hands covering his eyes like a small child, but unlike a small child with his litany of curses, which are coming like a mantra.

"Oh no," I say and look to Bill.

"Someone didn't lock the wheels on the transport trolley and..."

Bill takes my arm and gently leads me away from the chaos and into the Cash dressing room, my favorite backstage area. A black-and-white drawing of Johnny Cash hangs on the wall in a bright red frame, his smirk both smiling and daring at the same time. *Get Rhythm*, it shouts in blue letters. The coffee table, a shorn piece of oak, is littered with my song sheets. I sink onto the black leather couch with Johnny's gold album framed behind me.

"I want to be happy," I say to Bill, looking up at him. "This is everything I thought I wanted. This is my night in the spotlight."

"Then be happy, Mia. This is yours." He sits next to me.

"For a minute, or less than a minute, I thought that noise was a gunshot. I thought Red had come for me and for my song."

“He’s not like that. Not nearly like that.”

I nod and bow my head.

We’re silent for a moment, the room hushed and sacred. Again, he takes my hand and squeezes. My cell phone bursts into a harp melody, and we both startle, and then laugh. I glance at the screen. “It’s Red.”

“Do you want to talk to him?”

“No. I know why he’s calling, and I can’t hear his voice.” I click Ignore and turn off the phone. “Fear makes everything seem larger and more dangerous. Fear makes everything come at me in bass relief, like a monster in 3D.”

“But do you feel that fear when you’re singing?”

“No. I only feel it before or after I perform.”

“*That* is courage—doing it anyway. Now I’m going to give the set list to the band. You get ready.”

*You get ready.*

I know what he means. Get ready to sing. Dress and put on my makeup and allow the hairdresser to tease my hair as wide and tall as possible. Get ready to face my demons.

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The first three performers—Tim McGraw, Trace Adkins, and Patty Loveless—all adapt to a set without drums and put the crowd in a good mood until it’s my turn. At the side of the stage, still hidden from view, Patty announces my arrival. She tells my story of being raised on a farm in Tennessee, of losing my dad at a young age, of fighting my way to Nashville and living in a friend’s basement, of my four hundred songs until “Ruins” hit the top ten. Would they please give a warm welcome to Mia Jensen?

I stride onstage, blinded by the spotlight. My red dress, glittering and long, flows around me like a butterfly. I smell the acrid hair spray and feel the false eyelashes like tiny weights. All sensation is amplified. That is, until I swing my guitar strap around my shoulder and my Gibson settles. My fingers touch the taut wire strings and it all falls away—the world, the noises, the smells, and the fear.

“I’m honored to be here tonight. This is the dream of a lifetime.” My practiced words come smooth and easy into the silver microphone. “My first song tonight is one I believe you all know well. I wrote it one night beside a

dying campfire. I found the heart of it as the sun rose the next morning and the words fell together like the pieces of my life, forming a picture I hadn't seen before. I hope you love it."

I strum a few notes, feel sure of the tuning, and then, as taught by performance coaches, I look up and beam at the audience before launching into "Ruins."

When the applause dies down, I glance to the band. I know the second song Bill has given them is "Consolation." They wait for my cue, and I don't give it to them. Instead I glance to the front row, scan the faces gazing up at me, expectant.

Red.

Yes, he's there in the front row. He stares directly at me, and his face is set and tight. There isn't anything in his demeanor that reminds me of the man I loved. How had I not seen this incensed part of him that only wants to be adored? When we love, do we only see what we want, or are our eyes just clouded by expectancy and desire?

In a flash, I'm twelve years old and my mother is hollering at me to do something with my life instead of playing the damn guitar all day. I'm fifteen and my guidance counselor is telling me I will never amount to anything if I don't get my head out of the clouds. I'm eighteen and the first boy I made love to is explaining that I'm just another girl, another notch in his bedpost (literally). I'm twenty-two and a bar owner is explaining that I don't have the talent and my music will go nowhere in this town unless I sleep with him. I'm thirty-five and Red is making it clear to me that he loves another woman and I am a dear friend, as comfortable as a pair of worn-in boots. On that stage, as I decide whether to sing the song, I am all of the selves I've ever been, and all of the selves defined by others.

No more.

I define myself.

I choose.

The silence stretches to an uncomfortable length, and I run my fingers across the strings, felt their vibratory comfort, and signal the band behind me. A bass joins in, as does the piano. A slow rhythm moves through my body—my self, as defined by me.

And I sing the song. I sing it with every fiber of my being, its resonant chords filling the sacred hall. The words are made of crystal, clear and fragile, and I handle them with loving care.

When I finish I don't glance at Red, or at the crowd, but instead close my eyes. The thunderous applause fills me until I open my eyes to the standing ovation. Everyone in the room is on their feet, except Red. He sits in that first row and glowers while patrons stomp their feet and holler approval. Red then stands, but not in approval. His six-foot-six frame dominates the front row, and he turns on his boots and strides up the middle aisle, across the back of the auditorium and the displays of country music star memorabilia, then out the rear double doors. No one notices, or if they do, they pay him no mind as they continue to clap, as the room thunders.

I bow and thank them with a shaking voice.

I told the truth, and what else was a song meant to do? What else was I ever been meant to do? All those months of thinking I've fallen into the wrong life because my heart was broken were months filled with the hollowness of mistaken beliefs. This, right here, this is my purpose—to tell the truth in lyrics and melody, to allow others to feel the same, to let the wounded souls of the world know that we are not alone.

I wanted to be someone else during the pain, I wanted a different life, but this is my life and my pain and my songs and my purpose.

# THE WIDOW

KATE MORETTI

NO ONE PREPARES YOU FOR the feeling of a new kiss. Hands on your waist that are bigger than what you've been used to for twenty years. The smell of a new soap, shampoo, aftershave. A different weight in the bed next to you. You find yourself noticing the smallest movements, sighs, breaths, all in search of what's different. It's exciting and disorienting.

Martin smells like soap, where Linc had smelled sweetly like sweat. Martin was narrower but heavier than Linc. How? It doesn't make sense unless Martin was taller. But Linc was six-one. I used to be proud of that, having a tall husband. Such an odd thing to care about.

Martin's mouth tastes like peppermint. It bothers me that I can't taste *him*, only this bright, burning mint. It's not the first time we've kissed. Not the first time we've been to bed together. Just the first time we've been to *my* bed.

It's hopelessly distracting. I keep hearing noises, even though the house is empty.

Penelope went south with a friend, a weekend volleyball camp. Not the first time she's been away from home, of course; she is seventeen. But the first time in almost two years, since the accident. Paige, sixteen, stayed at Breanna's house. Breanna and Paige, tighter than sisters, wound around each other so

you could hardly tell where one ended and the other began. I'd come home to find them on the couch, a tangle of long legs and hair, watching *Pretty Little Liars* on Netflix and laughing so loud it sounded more like six girls than two. I'd never found the show funny in the least and I tried to say that, *What's so funny about this show?* But they just laughed again, shared a secret smile, and I stood awkwardly in the doorway.

That was before Martin. Now, after Martin, the house is eerily silent. Pen is always around, but she's quiet as a mouse. Pleasant, usually. Paige is, always has been, the fire starter. She came into the world screaming, her face purple and raw, and hasn't stopped since. Now, Paige goes to Breanna's, no spider knot of limbs and hair on the sofa.

I think I hear the door and go still under him.

"It's after midnight, you know," he whispers, his mouth featherlight against my neck.

"I know." I sit up. Pull the sheets around me, click on the lamp next to the bed. If she came home—how would she come home, she can't even drive—and Martin was here, in my bed? His palm is warm against my bare back.

Once, when Linc was alive, I bumped the gas on the stove with my hip and didn't realize it. I didn't know how long it sat like that, collecting gas in the crevices of the grate. I started a pot of water for pasta, and as soon as I turned the dial the whole thing blew up. There was a loud *whomp* like all the air being sucked out of the room and a flash, and I was able to shut the valve off. For a second, while all the gas burned off, the whole kitchen was alight in blue flame. It burned out quickly, but those seconds felt like an eternity. Not knowing if the house would catch or not. Not knowing if we were safe.

Paige and I were like that. And the gas had been going for a long time now.

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Linc's death was simple: He was here one day, then he was not. He was driving home from the hospital one night after a long shift on a long stretch of a dark, country road and an SUV crossed the yellow line, pinning his gray Toyota against the guardrail until it gave way and both cars tumbled into the ravine along Route 59. Somewhere in those few minutes, Linc died. The SUV hit him in the driver's-side door as they were going around the curve. One of his ribs snapped, punctured his lung, and he drowned in his own

blood. His skull was fractured in three places, and he was therefore likely unconscious. If he'd felt pain, it was probably only seconds (this was meant to comfort me).

The driver of the other car is still in a coma. They found the SUV and the car tangled together a fiery steel knot.

Linc and I had both been nurses. I know and understand more about the clinical details of his death than your average widow. In the beginning, I believed that people wanted to know the technicalities when they asked *How did it happen?* I'd see the horror on their faces, the pause, the glance at their spouse, and realize, *Oh, not that way. You didn't mean that way.*

Eventually, I just said *car accident* and that was fine. I mean, after a while people stopped asking, because everyone knew by then.

No one ever tells you that you must learn how to be a widow, that grieving isn't instinctual. At least, not appropriate grieving. I could never do the things I truly wanted to do: cry at grocery stores when our wedding song came on the sound system, punch a fist-sized hole in the wall when I learned that he had been sleeping with someone else.

When your husband dies, it's confusing. You know him better than anyone, so when they say *He was the most generous person alive*, you think no, not really. He'd never give money to grifters. He always said he'd rather give a lump sum to a shelter, get the receipt and the tax deduction. And then he *did* give money, so he actually *was* generous, and he followed through with his proclamations, which is admirable in its own right, but the desire to posthumously elevate Linc to sainthood grated on me.

It used to make me want to scream, like the person he was—the real, true human, not this godly figure he was being recast as—wasn't enough. He also had to be perfect or else we couldn't miss him. I missed him plenty while still acknowledging he'd never hit a nail with a hammer in his life and never met a beer he didn't love.

Quite a lot used to irritate me about Linc's death. For starters, he didn't get to live and she did.

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Martin leaves in the morning before Paige comes home, slinking out like a one-night stand. He insists that's now how it is, but the role reversal is

unnerving. The child is the keeper, I'm sneaking around.

I wander the house, feeling flush with love, then ashamed. It's hard to admit what this is: love. There's no other reason to go through all this. The impossibility of our situation, for anything other than love. A complicated, messy, ridiculous love. One that makes no sense.

When Linc and I fell in love, decades ago, over tacos at Senor's (laughing about the generic, Americanized name of the Mexican joint), nothing was complicated. It was all easy. Complications came later, after I quit the hospital to be with the girls. After Linc started drinking, at first just beers with the guys, then other nurses. Then late nights he made excuses for. On nights he didn't come home, I'd whip through a bottle of white before I realized it. The girls were teenagers, moody, distant. I was spiraling, didn't know how to ask for help. Linc, was, well, Linc, and everything would be fine, he always said, with a pat to my hand or kiss on the crown of my head. Bills piled up. Linc made comments about going back to work, now that the girls didn't need me so much. He never knew how much that stung, how going back to work seemed—no, *was*—impossible. How all I'd come to know was mothering. How bereft I'd been feeling.

I never knew how hard it was for him to carry the burden of our life alone. More accurately, I never tried to learn.

You always think there will be time to close the distance. And even if things aren't great right now, you'll figure it out. You're both dependable, steady. Solid.

Then, the accident.

Then, the affair revealed.

It was almost anticlimactic. At the funeral, Nina Preston crying a bit too hard, her tall, gangly husband by her side. A flash of something maroon in her hand, silky and small. A pocket square. Vaguely familiar, yet the day was so jumbled, I hardly remembered it until I was cleaning out Linc's dresser. Almost a month later. Early, by some standards, but something about his dresser gnawed at me (arguably, I was looking for evidence). I pulled it out, a maroon pocket square—part of a three pack: all maroon and black in various patterns—checkered, striped, diamond. In the drawer, still in the packaging: only the striped and checkered. No diamond.

I ran my fingers along a satin edge and wondered: His late nights. A long phone conversation on the bill (with his buddy, Bob, he'd said, and I'd never tried to find Bob's number, just asked out of curiosity: my silent-ish, stoic husband on the phone for seventy-two minutes?). A hushed, middle-of-the-night phone call I'd woken up to months ago, padding out into the hallway to find him sitting on the top step. He'd waved me back to bed, smiling, like it was nothing, mouthing *Tell ya later*, and I'd fallen asleep before he came back to bed. Had we really grown so far apart that I couldn't remember if he'd ever actually *told me later*?

I still thought about Nina Preston with a detached fascination. I saw her once, picking up paperwork at the hospital. She stopped when she saw me, her mouth parted slightly. She recovered, said all the right things, *Oh, I'm so sorry, Mia. Can I do anything for you? How are the girls holding up?* But I saw her hand shake, that little tremor of her pinkie finger, a poker tell.

It was then that I thought of that pocket square. A gift from Penelope for Christmas once, years ago. He'd never used them. Who knows why she had it? Who understands the private jokes between lovers?

Certainly, never the wife.

---

Paige comes home late, after lunch. I almost call her but settle for a text that she ignores.

### **Want to go for lunch?**

"I sent you a text," I say as she comes in the door, tossing her overnight bag in the corner and eyeing me, daring me to correct her. I would have, but I'm weak now, sort of pathetic, begging her to forgive me.

For what?

"Sorry, I didn't see it." A lie. Her phone buzzes, pulses, practically alive.

"Lunch?" I ask, and I see her how she sees me. Hands clasped in front of me. Eager and hopeful. "Panera?"

She squares her shoulders, and for a second, I think she'll say yes. Then she sees it. Martin's sweatshirt, tossed over the back of Linc's old chair. He'd left in a hurry. Her eyes narrow and she hitches her chin in my direction.

"I'm good. I ate." She turns, tossing dark hair over her shoulder, and takes

the steps two at a time.

“How was Breanna’s?” I call after her, like a begging dog.

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Later, I make dinner. Penelope will be home. My Pen, built like me, tall and thin like a dancer. Dirty-blond hair that I sometimes get highlighted (more now than ever, if I’m being honest) but Pen doesn’t. She’s quiet and sweet, and more than that, she’s happy for me. She cares more about volleyball, studying. Her small circle of friends tight and kind, and we’ve never had the blowout teenage drama that I’d always heard about. I thought I’d somehow dodged it, until Paige. At sixteen, Paige vibrates teenage angst. Her dark complexion, compact build—I don’t even know where she got all that coiled energy from. Linc and I were both tall, languid, almost serpentine, in both appearance and personality.

What kind of mother cares more about her own happiness than her child’s? What do you do when you can’t stand your own daughter? Nothing. You do nothing. You say nothing. I know this. And yet, the hatred in Paige’s eyes as she looked from that sweatshirt to me and back cuts a hot knife right through my heart.

How long is long enough? I want to ask. It’s been almost two years. Almost is not enough, this I know to be true.

---

Upstairs I knock on her door. I try the handle and find it unlocked. She’s lying on her bed, on her side, her back to me, pretending to sleep. I sit on the edge and rub her back, like I’ve done since she was small. I imagine the small mole between her shoulder blades, the one I used to wash and check obsessively, worried about skin cancer, and Linc would laugh. *Skin cancer on a four-year-old*. He always said I was looking for things to fret about. Fretting was my hobby, he’d said. Having children changed me, he’d said, into a worrier. He’d said it fondly at one time, like I’d been brand new to him then. This worrying, fretting mom-person. Sometimes he’d said it to cut, but not often.

It occurs to me that this complicated history, this historical web—something as simple as a mole, Linc’s reaction to my worry—is what Paige is grieving the loss of. Linc’s absence tears a hole right through it. What used to feel like a

safety net now feels precarious. False. Like a trick drinking glass. Then what is Martin? A stick of dynamite, blowing everything the hell up.

In my head, I try out different openings. *How long must I be alone?* No, too much about me. *What bothers you the most?* No, too dangerous.

I settle for “Do you want to talk about it?” and curse myself for asking a yes or no question.

“No.” Of course. She sighs into her pillow.

“Paige,” I say. No idea what to say next, and beneath my palm her back stills. Holding her breath. “I love you.”

I feel the buck of her, underneath my hand, holding in a sob. She’s been crying. Oh, my baby girl.

Before I can hug her, she says, “Why him, Mom? I hate that you’ve done this to us. I hate him.”

“You don’t know him,” I say, before realizing that’s the wrong thing. She scrambles to sitting, wiping her hands, hard across her eyes, her face.

“I never will.” Her voice is low, her long, thick dark hair plastered to her cheeks, a sheen of snot under her nose. “And if you don’t break up with him, I’ll hate you, too.”

---

Paige stays upstairs the whole night, stewing in her anger. Penelope gets home, we eat. Tuscan soup with crusty bread and salad. I’ve learned to enjoy living in a house with all women. Linc would have complained about the lack of meat. Soup isn’t a meal, it’s a snack, he’d say.

She chatters on about the camp, the coaches, the college girls there, a glint of mischief in her eyes. A serve she’s finally straightened out. I listen to her voice, settling into it, the soft hum and gentle excitement. She asks about Paige.

“She won’t come downstairs. She’s too angry.” I take a breath. “She stayed at Breanna’s, and Martin came over.” It’s a slight airbrushing of events. I don’t say he *slept* over. Penelope nods, slowly.

“She’s mad, then.”

“Yes. Are you?”

“No. Mom.” Her eyes go up, searching the ceiling for easier answers before setting back on me. “I want you to be happy. You deserve to be happy.”

I exhale, a huge relief. I sense the *but* before she says it.

“But?” I ask, fear tamping down my happiness.

She bites her lip. “I just wish he were someone else.”

---

Penelope had been mine, and Paige was Linc’s. Vacations, amusement parks, movies. Pen’s hand slid into mine automatically. When she was little, her fingers found mine, prying against whatever I was holding, or doing, forcing their way in like little heat-seeking missiles. I never knew if the magnetic ease in which Pen and I came together is what turned Paige or if Paige’s deference to Linc drove me toward Pen. I know I’m the mother: I’m supposed to be able to withstand the storms of my children. And yet.

The few times we’d switch it up, I’d grab Paige’s hand or Link would reach for Pen, always felt like we’d had our shoes on the wrong feet. It seemed to work for us because they didn’t fight, there wasn’t an overt rivalry. Only now, with the anger permeating the whole house and Paige seemingly so bereaved, did I wonder what I’d done. If we’d done it all wrong. When Paige had been little, and even a preteen, any tantrum or meltdown, I’d always said to Linc, *Can you talk to her?* He could reach her whereas I could not. It had been easier, faster, and in those days, time was of the essence. We’d always been rushed to get somewhere: piano lessons, Girl Scouts, dinner, bath, bed. *Fix it quickly* had been our mantra.

I missed him so much. I almost couldn’t recall the way his arms felt around me. We hadn’t routinely hugged or touched outside the bedroom for a while before he’d died. I thought it was waxing and waning. I don’t even remember missing it. I don’t miss it now.

What I miss is a partner. Someone to take, for one day, the burden away, do the dirty work, the hard stuff. Someone who could reach Paige. And say what? Your mother deserves to have a boyfriend?

*Get over yourself*, I say inwardly. Paige’s backpack sits haphazardly, thrown in the corner of the living room. I can see it from where I’m standing in the kitchen. Normally, I’d be annoyed. How hard is it to take their backpacks up to their rooms at the end of the day? Instead, I feel a rush of affection. How long do I have left? In a year Pen will be off to college. Then Paige. There will be no backpacks thrown in the corner, no bowls with chip crumbs left in

the living room, no abandoned water cups. It will just be me.

I open the junk drawer and withdraw a pen, a notepad. Scribble a note, the old-fashioned way. I could have texted, but this might be such a surprise. A little jolt to see my handwriting on a creamy sheet of paper, instead of words tapped on a screen.

**Have a good day. I love you. Russo's tonight? Just you and I. 7 p.m.  
Meet me?**

It's an impulse but a good one, I think. Who knows if she'll come. She has play practice after school.

They bound down the steps together, a talking, laughing cloud of perfume. Each gives me a quick kiss on the cheek. I hug Paige a beat longer. Her body is stiff, unyielding, but she doesn't push away.

"Check your front pocket!" I yell to her as they slam the door behind them. I hear the car doors thunk, one after the other. Pen has been driving Paige to school forever. I've been putting off teaching Paige to drive. The idea of the two of us, trapped in a car together, makes me shudder. I'd always counted on Linc to do it. Now, who knows? She doesn't seem eager. Pen is an easy shuttle anywhere she needs to be.

The car pulls away, and I watch from the front door. Pen's arm out the open window, her hand moving up and down with the air.

---

Martin has a son who is twenty-three. His name is Trevor, and he lives out along the river with his girlfriend in a cabin on stilts. He smokes a lot of pot, I think. His girlfriend has bleached dreadlocks, wrapped in a bandana. Her name is Inga, and she loops her arm through mine as we walk into the cafe. I've met Trevor before, but never Inga.

Martin holds my other hand and I feel caged in, but I mind it less than I would have thought. Martin is affectionate, in public and private. Linc used to be, too, so maybe we're just new to each other.

"Inga is a speech therapist," Martin says. He's confided that he wants Trevor and Inga to get married. Trevor frequently talks about the "fucked up" institution of marriage. I'm not quite sure what Trevor does—something in finance. Maybe an accountant? He commutes to the city.

“Do you think you’ll go back to work?” Trevor asks me, and Inga smacks his arm.

“He’s so rude,” she says. But it’s not a rude question, it’s one I’m sure many people are thinking. I smile.

“Mia was a nurse,” Martin says, proudly. People think it’s noble, but it’s a job like any other. Albeit slightly more chaotic than some, often with a smaller pay scale.

“What kind?” Inga asks, her voice pitched with excitement.

“A trauma nurse.” I shrug. “In the ER, then the OR. I loved it. I miss it.” It’s true, I do miss it. The frenetic pace of the ER on a holiday weekend. I don’t miss the February Saturdays that were nothing but vomiting children from the latest round of norovirus. I pause. “I will go back, one day.” The admission surprises me, but insurance money doesn’t last forever. Rattling around an empty house does not make a productive life. Martin squeezes my hand.

Later, he says, “Inga loved you.”

He hasn’t said *he* loves me yet, but I feel it.

“Paige is mad at me,” I tell him.

“Because of me,” he says and I nod.

He sighs. “What do you need from me?”

If I broke up with him, he’d understand. He’d go away, Paige and I would go back to normal, maybe. But then what? They go to college.

I’ve thought about it. Two years. We stay apart for two years, then when the girls are gone, we get back together.

“Do you think this is too hard?” Martin is tall, happy, and relaxed. He’s easy to be with, and when he smiles, which is often, his eyes crinkle. He’s been through more than I have, in less time. A messy separation, impending divorce, followed by a tragedy. And yet, he’s upbeat and positive. Being without his light, now that I have it, would be too hard.

We met for the first time in a coffee shop. He’d emailed me, an outreach he’d been compelled to do. An apology for my situation, what happened to Linc, an immediate connection. A deeper understanding for our shared situation. We’d chatted over email for a few weeks, then maybe four months ago, met for coffee. We both took cream, no sugar, and something that stupid

had pulled at me. Later, I'd learn more: He sometimes cried at movies, especially the end of war and sports movies. He was a slob, although it was confined to his bedroom—clothes and socks everywhere, abandoned coffee mugs and books. He read everything. He loved, *loved* Pink Floyd. He was turning fifty next year and was, just a little, bothered by it. The touch of vanity was both surprising and tender.

I'd been hungry for affection before Linc died. After? I was starving.

What amazed me the most is how he listened. Not just to me, but to everyone. In ways Linc never did, even way back when, before we had kids. Linc never remembered things I'd said. He never picked a thoughtful birthday present. I'd spend the whole year making notes on my phone: things Linc wanted, liked. I'd present them all with a flourish on his birthday, or at Christmas. A year's worth of collected intelligence. He was always impressed, which made me happy. I'd open another necklace, beautiful, generally expensive. I'd ooh and ahh. The girls would make a fuss. At the time, I never thought I was disappointed. Later, in a fight, I'd brought it up, shocking both of us. I'd used it as a weapon, fourteen-carat gold proof of his laziness, inattention.

The other day, Martin brought me an art set. The kind with brush markers and oil pastels, in a wooden case. Earlier that week, we had stopped at a café, split an ice-cream sundae. I had watched him, from across the table, skim all the whipped cream off first because I hated it and he loved it. He'd tapped the spoon to my nose, leaving a puff of white, then kissed it off. The whole afternoon had been spontaneous and silly. He'd asked me what my favorite childhood toy was. It took me three whole minutes to remember. I'd spent hours in my preteens drawing and painting still lifes: bowls of fruit, my mother's vases, a bunch of spring flowers. Filling it in with oily pastels.

Instantly, I'd thought of the parade of necklaces. Rubies, sapphires, an emerald. There was something unfair about it: Linc wouldn't have known to buy something so special. He'd never asked. But had I?

When my girlfriends said, "It must be so hard to lose the love of your life," I never knew what to say. The ugly truth was, when Linc died, *because* Linc died, I found mine. How do you tell anyone that?

---

We're in the car when the phone rings. Martin is driving me home after lunch, his hand tapping to a beat on the radio. The windows are down, the air in the car is warm. My chest feels tight with happiness. The happiness that feels fleeting, I *know* it's fleeting, and I'm thinking about the temporary nature of it even before I see his face.

"It's hospice," he says before he picks it up with a deep *hello*. He's quiet for a moment and I can hear the tinny echo of a voice on the other end, though I can't make out the words.

He hangs up and without looking at me, says, "I have to go."

It's the call we've been waiting for. The one that would make or break us. The one, maybe, that would be the end to this fleeting, crazy, stupid idea we'd had. Or the beginning, who knew? I close my eyes for a second, reach out. Tap his hand twice, feeling the bones beneath my fingertips, large knuckles, capable hands, veins.

"I'll go, too," I say, unsure of what he wants. He turns to look at me briefly, his face unreadable, then eyes back to the road. He nods and steers the car into a cul-de-sac to turn around.

---

The waiting room is cold, the air conditioner blasting. I've read two *People* magazines and an *Enquirer*. A story about aliens and Oprah. Martin has gone in to talk to the doctors, come out to check if I'm okay, and gone back in again. After an hour, Trevor and Inga tumble out of the elevator. Trevor follows his dad into the locked corridor. Inga and I wait, making mild small talk, but my answers are short and clipped. My heart is a steady drumbeat in my chest. My head aches and I pop an ibuprofen, swallowing it dry.

I wonder if I'm meant to be here. It feels both intrusive and necessary. Could I just leave? I imagine scribbling a note. Sending a text. The doors at the end of the hallway swing open and shut with a continuous parade of visitors. I could easily join the stream. I don't. I imagine that if it were Pen or Paige here, would Martin leave? No. It's hardly an apt comparison.

Eventually, Martin comes through the double doors, looking a decade older. Trevor trails behind him, childlike, his expression lost.

My phone dings, and I look at the display. It says "Paige," and the time is 7:10 p.m. I don't know where the afternoon has gone, as I've sat here, heart

in my throat, knowing my life is about to be upended again. If, in fact, it had been ever righted, even for a few months.

A text comes through.

### **Are you here?**

It takes me a minute (why is Paige at hospice?), then:

*No. Russo's. Paige. Just the two of us.*

Shit.

Martin stops in front of me. I hold my breath.

“She’s awake.”

Two words, an absolute explosion of emotion. I cannot cry. Trevor has a mother. Martin has a wife again.

*But. She gets to live and he doesn't.*

Life is infinitely complicated. She, who drifted across the yellow line in a sleepy haze, pushing Linc’s car into a ravine. She, Martin’s wife.

### **Mom?**

Another text. I look from Martin, his face pained and aching. I want to throw my arms around his neck, comfort him, cry in his neck for both his gain and my probable, eventual, loss. For the first time, I want to slam my hands into his chest. Why didn’t he stop her from drinking? The thought is quick, subconscious. It’s the first time I’ve ever blamed him. With a jolt, I realize that I’d been pretending she died, too. I hadn’t thought about her, the accident. I hadn’t let myself wonder what would happen if she woke up. I had assumed that she would die. The doctors had said it was likely.

“I have to go,” I tell Martin. He looks startled. I show him the phone. “Paige. I promised her dinner. I forgot.” I gesture helplessly to the doors behind him.

“We can get through this,” he says. He wants to say it changes nothing, but it’s not true. It’s become an impossible situation.

“You have so much more to deal with,” I tell him. “Don’t worry about me, okay?” I hug him and he holds me. I let him go when my phone rings again.

**Mom, I hope you’re coming. I want you to be happy. You deserve everything, I’m sorry I’ve been such a shit. I don’t know what we would**

**do without you. Please?**

I think for a moment he's going to tell me he loves me, but it passes.  
On my phone, I type back:

**On my way. Hold a table for us. I love you, too.**

I look at Martin and think, I love you, too.

WHAT  
IS

# ALL HER LIVES

J.T. ELLISON

THE ANGEL'S VOICE IS SILENT and yet I can hear it clearly, as if bells are ringing in my head.

“Here. And here. And here.”

It points from life to life, allowing me to see myself in different guises, as different people, all me, all not...me. There I am, with a child. There I am, all alone. There, desperate. There, happy, in a way.

The angel points to my lives, and they run across the darkness as if they are movies on a screen being shown to strangers. Is that really me, standing in the Tuileries? She looks like me. She seems happy. But she is shadowed by something. A regret, maybe. A loss. I can see it surrounding her, though she is oblivious.

The view switches, again and again. Life after life.

“Go slower,” I demand, but the images go faster, blurring, making me dizzy.

The exciting, the banal, the strange, the scary. The loves and losses.

None of my lives are right. None are perfect. None are free of pain. No matter what choice I made, they all lead to the same place—some level of dissatisfaction. They all lead me back to me.

“This is a strange dream,” I say. “I want to wake up, now.”

“You do?” The angel, the being, whatever it is, seems...inquisitive. “You say you want to wake. This feels like a dream. But perhaps it’s truth. Perhaps you have lived all of these lives. Perhaps you haven’t. However you wish to see it. But I have a question for you, Mia. A very important question.”

The spinning images stop. The darkness returns. There is a sliver of light now, far, far away. It shimmers, and I feel drawn to it. “Yes?”

“Now that you know how it all would have worked out, every thought, every wish, every change, every decision—Mia, would you do it all again?”

“I—

It cuts me off. “Think carefully, Mia. Your answer is very important. Knowing your life will lead to this moment, that at 8:03 p.m. this evening, right now, you will die by your husband’s hand, will you accept your life as you’ve lived it? Or will you take one of the other paths? Live a different life?”

This feels all wrong. A decision of this magnitude...

“Am I the one who has to choose? Can someone choose for me?”

The angel shakes its head. “Have you learned nothing? You, and you alone, can choose. Your choices make you who you are.”

The images begin again, slower this time. I stare at the various lives I’ve been living. At the choices that led me to them. And then back to myself, me, lying on the gurney, a man with sandy hair standing over me, screaming something at the woman next to him. A nurse, I think.

I am broken. Dead. The life-support machines are keeping me alive. This sandy-haired man is keeping me alive.

For what?

I recognize myself, lying alone in the hospital. Flawed. Unhappy. Always wishing for more, for different, for something...else.

But it’s me. I don’t know how to be anyone else.

Sorrow fills me. I could have done so many things. Should have done so many things.

But now I know what I have to do.

“I don’t want any other life than mine,” I say. “Even if it’s my time to go, I want the life I’ve led.”

The angel looks...luminous, suddenly, as if I’ve pleased it somehow.

“As you wish, Mia.”

---

Happiness.

What is it, really? How do you know if you're happy? So many things make me feel the emotion: The blue sky of an October day. The feeling of sand beneath my toes, waves crashing nearby. The silence of a beautiful museum, the energy of a bookstore, the freedom of an airplane flight. A kiss.

When I died, I hadn't been happy in a very long time. I made some bad decisions. I let some opportunities pass me by. I let myself live in a bad marriage because it was too hard to leave it. I was consumed with regret. Consumed with anger. Obsessed with the thoughts of what could have been.

I've seen my lives now. I've seen the threads pulled. I've seen all the decisions I made differently lead to different places. The paths I chose, the paths I didn't choose.

Some paths brought me joy. Some brought me pain. Some brought me too close to the abyss. The abyss I now stand in front of, alone, watching them work on my body.

And now I have made my final choice.

It is time. I take my final breath.

Then I fall back into myself as if I've done a swan dive from the highest point of the room, and hit my body, hard.

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There are flashes.

My body, jostled. Pain, so intense and swift I want to cry out, but no sound comes from my mouth, only a scream from deep inside, waxing and waning as I struggle to catch my breath. I can't breathe. I am drowning.

The doctor's voice, so loud, so harsh.

“Charging. Hit her again. Who did this to you, sweetheart? Did you recognize him?”

The light is so bright, so intense, it's like nothing I've ever seen. I hurt. I hurt so badly. I can feel every ounce of electricity shooting through my body. It burns. I realize I can feel again. I put up a hand to stop them, and there is cheering.

“She’s back, she’s back.”

I open my eyes.

HOW  
IT  
ENDS

# MIA. JUST, MIA

J.T. ELLISON

**I**T HAS BEEN A YEAR since I died. A year of ups and down, of grueling recovery, painful therapy and setbacks. A year of changes.

Roger is in jail, festering like the bastard he is. He was worried an embezzlement charge was going to ruin him. I wonder what he thought was going to happen once an attempted first-degree murder conviction placed him squarely on death row.

I testified against him, in both trials: the embezzlement, and my attempted murder. It gave me such great satisfaction to see him wasted and worn, gray from being indoors all the time, the shackles around his legs and wrists. If there was ever a man who deserved what was surely to come from his future, it was Roger. Good. Riddance.

I've bought a new house. I couldn't possibly go on living in the cottage where I died. My new place is sunny and comfortable. I no longer have glass French doors, but there is a bright, sun-lit studio, and I've spent my recovery downtime painting again. The settlement with Roger's company means I'll never have to work again, though I probably will. I've written this story, and there are more brewing in my head. Like my paints and canvases and the smell

of linseed oil, the words feel natural, and flow out of me without reproach from my inner critic anymore.

I even have a boyfriend. I've been dating the doctor who saved my life. Silly, right? Total Hallmark Channel, I know. But we had some sort of weird connection after what we'd been through together, and when I was finally discharged from the hospital, and from his care, he called me and asked to have coffee.

One thing led to another. As it does.

His name is Ben. He's quiet, and funny, and well-read, and devastatingly handsome. He's taking me to Paris next week. He wants kids. He likes to cook, and thinks I should try to sell my paintings.

He accepts me for me. He has never asked for more than I can give. Has never raised a hand, or his voice. He has an easy smile.

I might even love him. He is easy to love.

I will never understand exactly what happened in the moments I was dead. Was it an out-of-body experience? Was I truly visited by some sort of angel? I don't know, and I don't care. Because while I died, I saw so many things. Some were memories, clearly. Some were fantasies. But others, others were a part of me, little bits that fell away from a decision made here and there that truly did take me on another path through my life. The ripples, the currents, that moved me into position after position, life after life.

I understand one thing, though. If I'd chosen another life, one that I coveted, I most certainly would have died.

I lived because I decided, once and for all, to be me, even if that meant my life was over.

I was given the best gift ever. By allowing myself to die, I was finally able to accept myself, just as I am. And live.

I'm Mia Jensen. I'm forty-one years old. And I am finally alive.

## A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

I AM SO HUMBLED TO SEE Mia finally come to life.

You see, I've been playing with this idea since 2010, the concept of a dissatisfied woman dying at the opening of a story, and as she dies, she gets to live her "what if" lives. I know I have a few lives I could have lived if I'd made a different choice here or there. I'm sure you do as well. I pitched it to my agent as *Sliding Doors* meets *The Lovely Bones*, but I never got around to writing it. There was a reason for that.

I never knew how to make it work. How to make Mia's lives—Mia's voice—different enough to allow her to live a series of completely unique, encapsulated lives.

So I decided to ask some incredibly talented authors to help. And help they did.

*A Thousand Doors* is one of the most exciting projects I've ever had the pleasure to work on. My authors knocked it out of the park with the lives they chose to portray. I read every story with my heart in my throat and tears in my eyes, seeing my Mia come to life over and over again.

I owe them all a debt of gratitude, especially Ariel Lawhon and Laura Benedict, who helped with the shaping of this work, on the front end, and the back, and especially the middle, supporting me while the writing and building and editing and adjusting went on (and on), Kim Killion, who brought the story to life with her fabulous design work, and Phyllis DeBlanche, for her keen editorial eye. And as always, my husband, Randy, who encouraged and listened and helped me dream.

If you've enjoyed the stories you've just read, I encourage you to pick up the contributors' novels. They are all incredible writers, and their books will transport you.

Thank you for journeying through Mia's lives with us.

—J.T. Ellison

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Kimberly Belle** is the *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of four novels: *The Last Breath*, *The Ones We Trust*, *The Marriage Lie*, and *Three Days Missing*. Her third novel, *The Marriage Lie*, was a semifinalist in the 2017 Goodreads Choice Awards for Best Mystery & Thriller and has been translated into a dozen languages. A graduate of Agnes Scott College, Kimberly worked in marketing and nonprofit fundraising before turning to writing fiction. She divides her time between Atlanta and Amsterdam.

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**Laura Benedict** is the Edgar- and ITW Thriller Award- nominated author of eight novels of mystery and suspense, including *The Stranger Inside* (February 2019). Her *Bliss House* gothic trilogy includes *The Abandoned Heart*, *Charlotte's Story* (*Booklist* starred review), and *Bliss House*. Her short fiction has appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and in numerous anthologies.

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**A.F. Brady** is a NYS Licensed Mental Health Counselor born and raised in Manhattan, currently living in New York with her husband, children and dog. Her first novel *The Blind* (Park Row Books) was published in September 2017. In addition to writing, A.F. currently works as a psychotherapist in her own private practice where she treat individuals and couples. She also runs a professional organizing and design business, based in the idea that mental health is affected by our home environments. She has been working in the

field of mental health since she was eighteen. She has worked in the psychiatric units of private hospitals, public mental health agencies, day treatment programs and private practices. She primarily works with adults suffering from major mental illnesses (schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, etc.), and addictions to drugs and/or alcohol. Her next novel *Once A Liar* (Park Row Books) is coming out in early 2019.

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**Paige Crutcher** is a writer, reader, yogi, journalist, and story wrangler. She's written for a variety of literary publications, including *Publishers Weekly*, where she worked as the Southern Correspondent and contributing editor. She's currently co-owner of the online marketing company cSocially Media. Paige lives in her hometown of Franklin, Tennessee with her husband, son, tiny chihuahua, and a houseful of books.

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**Rebecca Drake's** latest book, *Just Between Us*, was recently released by St. Martin's Press. *O, The Oprah Magazine*, chose it as a "compulsively readable thriller" and *Publisher's Weekly* and the *Associated Press* lauded it as "tense, bombshell laden and action-packed" and "twisty and compelling...a terrific read." Rebecca's last novel, *Only Ever You*, was chosen by Barnes & Noble as a top thriller of the month. *Library Journal* gave it a starred review, calling it a "gripping domestic thriller." She's also the author of *Don't Be Afraid*, *The Next Killing*, and *The Dead Place*, as well as "Loaded," which appeared in the anthology *Pittsburg Noir*. Rebecca is a Penn State grad and an instructor in Seton Hill University's Writing Popular Fiction MFA program. A native New Yorker, she currently lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with her husband, two children, a tiny dog, and a feisty cat. Rebecca loves to talk with readers.

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*New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author **J.T. Ellison** writes standalone domestic noir and psychological thriller series, the latter starring Nashville Homicide Lt. Taylor Jackson and medical examiner Dr. Samantha Owens, and pens the international thriller series "A Brit in the FBI" with #1

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**Patti Callahan Henry** is a *New York Times* bestselling author of several novels, including *The Bookshop at Water's End* and *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*. A finalist in the Townsend Prize for Fiction, an Indie Next Pick, an OKRA pick, and a multiple nominee for the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance (SIBA) Novel of the Year, Patti is published in numerous languages. Her articles and essays have appeared in *Southern Living*, *PINK*, *Writer's Digest*, *Portico Magazine*, *Birmingham Magazine*, *Our Prince of Scribes: Writers Remember Pat Conroy*, *Southern Writers Writing*, and *State of the Heart*. Patti is a frequent speaker at luncheons, book clubs and women's groups. Patti attended Auburn University for her undergraduate work, and Georgia State University for her graduate degree. Once a Pediatric Clinical Nurse Specialist, she now writes full time. The mother of three children, she now lives in both Mountain Brook, Alabama and Bluffton, South Carolina with her husband.

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**Joy Jordan-Lake** is the author of the bestselling novel *A Tangled Mercy*, a dual timeline story set in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015 and 1822. Her six earlier books include nonfiction, a collection of stories and *Blue Hole Back Home*, winner of the 2009 Christy Award for Best First Novel and the Common Book selection for several colleges and universities. Joy's next release (Sept. 2019) is a children's picture book, *A Crazy-Much Love*, targeted

for families with adopted children. She earned a Ph.D. in English lit and an M.A. from a theological seminary. Joy and her husband have three children and live just south of Nashville, where she writes and teaches as an adjunct professor for Belmont University. When not spending time hiking, hanging out with family or forcing herself to go running, she loves reading, traveling and sequestering herself on her screened porch with a sweet, needy Golden Retriever and a manic Maltipoo rescue pup. She is currently at work on another historical mystery set at the Biltmore Estate in the tumultuous 1890s.

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*USA Today* bestselling author **Alisha Klapheke** primarily writes fantasy inspired by history and touched with romance. When she isn't weaving stories or teaching at her family's martial arts studio, she travels the world, exploring ruins, looking for ghosts, and finding long forgotten folklore. If you like *Outlander*, check out her Edinburgh Seer trilogy. If you're more of a *Lord of the Rings* reader, take a peek at her Uncommon World series. (All books available on Amazon).

[www.alishaklapheke.com](http://www.alishaklapheke.com)

**Ariel Lawhon** is the critically acclaimed author of *I Was Anastasia* and other works of historical fiction. Her books have been translated into numerous languages and have been Library Reads, Indie Next, One Book One County, and Book of the Month Club selections. In addition, she is the co-founder of SheReads.org and lives in the rolling hills outside Nashville, Tennessee, with her husband, four sons, black Lab, and a deranged Siamese cat. She splits her time between the grocery store and the baseball field.

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Amazon Charts, *Wall Street Journal*, and #1 Amazon Kindle bestselling author **Kerry Lonsdale** writes standalone and series based emotionally charged domestic drama, family suspense, and women's fiction. Her books are sold worldwide in more than 25 countries and are being translated into 23 languages (and counting). Her latest book is *Everything We Give*, the final installment in the bestselling *Everything Series*. Co-founder of the Women's

Fiction Writers Association, an international organization that boasts over 1,000 writers, Kerry resides in Northern California with her husband, two children, two naughty kitties, and an aging Golden Retriever convinced she's still a puppy.

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**Catherine McKenzie** is the bestselling author of numerous books including *Hidden* and *The Good Liar*. An avid skier and runner, she lives in Montreal, Canada, where she's a partner in a litigation firm.

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**Kate Moretti** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of six women's fiction and suspense novels. *The Vanishing Year* (2016) was a 2016 Goodreads Choice nominee and was called "chillingly satisfying." (*Publisher's Weekly*) with "superb" closing twists (*New York Times Book Review*). Her newest book, *In Her Bones* is available September 2018 (Atria Books/S&S). She lives in eastern Pennsylvania with her husband and two children.

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**Lisa Patton** is the bestselling author of what *Library Journal* calls, "the beloved Dixie series," *Whistlin' Dixie in a Nor'easter*, *Yankee Doodle Dixie*, and *Southern as a Second Language*. Lisa is a Memphis, Tennessee native who spent time as a Vermont innkeeper until three sub-zero winters sent her speeding back down South. Her current novel, *Rush*, an Okra Pick from the Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance, has been praised by the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* as "a story about right versus wrong, old traditions pitted against modern ideas and changing times." Lisa has over 20 years experience working in the music and entertainment business, and is a graduate of the University of Alabama. The proud mother of two sons, eight bonus children and eleven grandchildren, she lives in the rolling hills of Nashville, Tennessee with her husband and their four-legged, furry daughter named Rosie.

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**Kaira Rouda** is a *USA TODAY* bestselling, multiple-award-winning

author. Her novels include *Best Day Ever*; *The Goodbye Year*; *Here, Home, Hope*; *All the Difference* and *In the Mirror*. She is also the author of the bestselling short story “Mother’s Day,” the Laguna Beach series and the Indigo Island series. Her next novel, *The Favorite Daughter*, is out May 2019. Kaira lives in Southern California with her family.

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X

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