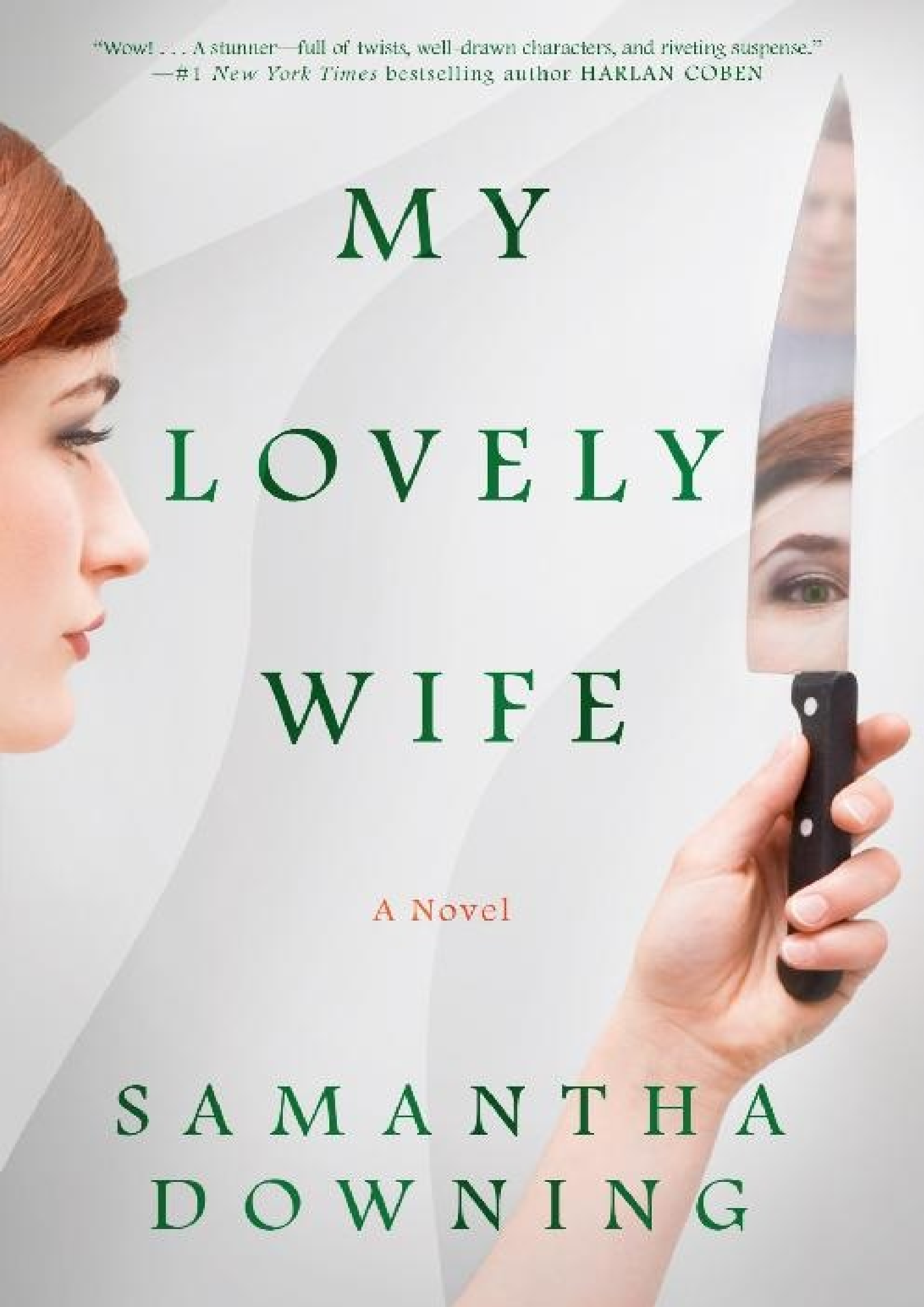


"Wow! . . . A stunner—full of twists, well-drawn characters, and riveting suspense."
—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author HARLAN COBEN



MY LOVELY WIFE

A Novel

SAMANTHA
DOWNING

My Lovely Wife

SAMANTHA DOWNING

BERKLEY
New York

BERKLEY

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014



Copyright © 2019 by Samantha Downing

Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

BERKLEY and the BERKLEY & B colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Downing, Samantha, author.

Title: My lovely wife / Samantha Downing.

Description: First edition. | New York: Berkley, 2019.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018016347 | ISBN 9780451491725 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780451491749 (ebook)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Suspense fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3604.O9457 M9 2019 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018016347>

International edition ISBN: 9781984804631

First Edition: March 2019

Cover art: Woman by Matthias Ritzmann / Corbis Collection / GettyImages; Male reflection by Markus Moellenberg / GettyImages; Graphic waves by Sergei Sidin / Shutterstock

Cover design by Emily Osborne

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Version_1

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-one](#)

[Chapter Thirty-two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-one](#)

[Chapter Forty-two](#)

[Chapter Forty-three](#)

[Chapter Forty-four](#)

[Chapter Forty-five](#)

[Chapter Forty-six](#)

[Chapter Forty-seven](#)

[Chapter Forty-eight](#)

[Chapter Forty-nine](#)

[Chapter Fifty](#)

[Chapter Fifty-one](#)

[Chapter Fifty-two](#)
[Chapter Fifty-three](#)
[Chapter Fifty-four](#)
[Chapter Fifty-five](#)
[Chapter Fifty-six](#)
[Chapter Fifty-seven](#)
[Chapter Fifty-eight](#)
[Chapter Fifty-nine](#)
[Chapter Sixty](#)
[Chapter Sixty-one](#)
[Chapter Sixty-two](#)
[Chapter Sixty-three](#)
[Chapter Sixty-four](#)
[Chapter Sixty-five](#)
[Chapter Sixty-six](#)
[Chapter Sixty-seven](#)
[Chapter Sixty-eight](#)
[Chapter Sixty-nine](#)
[Chapter Seventy](#)
[Chapter Seventy-one](#)
[Chapter Seventy-two](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[*Acknowledgments*](#)
[*About the Author*](#)

One

SHE IS LOOKING at me. Her blue eyes are glassy, they flicker down to her drink and back up. I look at my own drink and can feel her watching, wondering if I'm as interested as she is. I glance over and smile to show her I am. She smiles back. Most of her lipstick is gone, now a reddish smear on the rim of her glass. I walk over and take the seat next to her.

She fluffs her hair. It is unremarkable in both color and length. Her lips move, she says hello, and her eyes are brighter. They look backlit.

Physically, I appeal to her the same way I would appeal to most women in this bar. I am thirty-nine, in excellent shape with a full head of hair and a deep set of dimples, and my suit fits better than any glove. That's why she looked at me, why she smiled, why she is happy I have come over to join her. I am the man she has in mind.

I slide my phone across the bar toward her. It displays a message.

Hello. My name is Tobias.

She reads it and crinkles her brow, looking back and forth between the phone and me. I type another message.

I am deaf.

Her eyebrows shoot up, she covers her mouth with one hand, and the pink rises on her skin. Embarrassment looks the same on everyone.

She shakes her head at me. Sorry, so sorry. She did not know.

Of course you didn't. How could you?

She smiles. It is not quite whole.

I am no longer the picture in her head, no longer the man she imagined, but now she isn't sure what to do.

She picks up my phone and types back.

I'm Petra.

A pleasure to meet you, Petra. You are Russian?

My parents were.

I nod and smile. She nods and smiles. I can see her mind churning.

She would rather not stay with me. She wants to go find a man who can hear her laugh and does not have to type out his words.

At the same time, her conscience tells her not to discriminate. Petra does not want to be the shallow woman who refuses a man because he is deaf. She doesn't want to turn me down the way so many others have.

Or so she assumes.

Her internal battle is like a three-act play unfolding before my eyes, and I know how it ends. At least most of the time.

She stays.

Her first question is about my hearing, or lack of it. Yes, I have been deaf from birth. No, I have never heard anything—not a laugh, not a voice, not a puppy barking or a plane overhead.

Petra gives me a sad face. She does not realize this is patronizing, and I don't tell her, because she is trying. Because she stays.

She asks if I can read lips. I nod. She starts to talk.

"When I was twelve, I broke my leg in two places. Bike accident." Her mouth moves in the most exaggerated, grotesque way. "Anyway, I had to wear a cast that went from my foot all the way up to my thigh." She stops, draws a line across her thigh in case I have trouble understanding. I don't, but I appreciate the attempt. And the thigh.

She continues. "I couldn't walk at all for six weeks. At school, I had to use a wheelchair, because the cast was too heavy for crutches."

I smile, half imagining little Petra with a big cast. Half imagining where this sad story is heading.

"I'm not saying I know what it's like to live in a wheelchair, or to have any permanent disability. I just always feel like ... well, it feels like I've had a small taste of what it would be like, you know?"

I nod.

She smiles with relief, afraid her story might have offended me.

I type:

You are very sensitive.

She shrugs. Beams at the compliment.

We have another drink.

I tell her a story that has nothing to do with being deaf. I tell her about my childhood pet, a frog named Sherman. He was a bullfrog who sat on the biggest rock in the pond and hogged all the flies. I never tried to catch Sherman; I would just watch him, and sometimes he watched me, too. We liked to sit together, and I started calling him my pet.

“What happened to him?” Petra asks.

I shrug.

One day the rock was empty. Never saw him again.

Petra says this is sad. I tell her it isn't. Sad would've been finding his dead body and being forced to bury him. I never had to do that. I just imagined he went to a bigger pond with more flies.

She likes this and tells me so.

I do not tell her everything about Sherman. For instance, he had a long tongue that darted around so fast I could hardly see it, but I always wanted to grab it. I used to sit by the pond and wonder how bad of a thought that was. How terrible was it to try and grab a frog's tongue? And would it hurt him? If he died, would it be murder? I never tried to grab his tongue and probably couldn't have anyway, but I thought about it. And that made me feel like I wasn't a good friend to Sherman.

Petra tells me about her cat, Lionel, who is named after her childhood cat, also named Lionel. I tell her that's funny, but I'm not sure it is. She shows me pictures. Lionel is a tuxedo cat, with a face divided between black and white. He is too stark to be cute.

She continues to talk and shifts to her work. She brands products and companies, and she says it's both the easiest and the most difficult thing. Difficult in the beginning, because it's so hard to get anyone to remember anything, but as more people start to recognize a brand, it becomes easy.

“At some point, it doesn't even matter what we're selling. The brand becomes more important than the product.” She points to my phone and asks if I bought it because of the name or because I like the phone.

Both?

She smiles. “See. You aren't even sure.”

I guess not.

“What do you do?”

Accountant.

She nods. It is the least exciting profession in the world, but it is solid, stable, and something a deaf guy can easily do. Numbers don't speak with a voice.

The bartender comes over. He is neat and clean, college-aged. Petra takes charge of the ordering, and it is because I am deaf. Women always think I need to be taken care of. They like to do things for me because they think I am weak.

Petra secures us two more drinks and a fresh bowl of snacks, and she smiles like she is proud of herself. It makes me laugh. Silently, but still a laugh.

She leans toward me and puts her hand on my arm. Leaves it there. She has forgotten I am not her ideal man, and our progression is now predictable. It's not long before we go to her place. The decision is easier than it should be, though not because I find her particularly attractive. It is the choice. She gives me the power to decide, and right now I am a man who says yes.

Petra lives downtown, close to the bar, in the middle of all the big branding signs. Her place is not as neat as I'd expected. There is clutter everywhere: papers and clothes and dishes. It makes me think she loses her keys a lot.

“Lionel is around here somewhere. Hiding, probably.”

I don't look for that stark cat.

She flits around, dropping her bag in one place and removing her shoes in another. Two glasses appear, filled with red wine, and she leads me into the bedroom. She turns to face me, smiling. Petra has become more attractive—even her plain hair seems to sparkle. It is the alcohol, yes, but it's also her happiness. I get the feeling she has not been this happy in a while, and I'm not sure why. Petra is attractive enough.

She presses up against me, her body warm, her breath soaked in wine. She takes the glass out of my hand and puts it down.

I do not finish drinking it until much later, when we are in the dark and the only light is from my phone. We type back and forth, making fun of ourselves and the fact that we do not know each other.

I ask:

Favorite color?

Lime green.

Ice cream?

Bubble gum.

Bubble gum? The blue stuff?

Yes.

Who says that?

What's your favorite?

French vanilla. Pizza topping?

Ham.

We're done here.

Are we?

Wait, are we still talking about pizza?

We are not talking about pizza.

Afterward, she dozes off first. I think about leaving, then about staying, and the idea bounces around so long I doze off.

When I wake up, it's still dark. I slip out of the bed without waking Petra. She is sleeping facedown, one leg askew and her hair spread out on the pillow. I cannot decide if I really like her or not, so I don't decide at all. I do not have to.

On the nightstand, her earrings. They are made of colored glass, a swirl of blue shades, and they look like her eyes. After getting dressed, I slip the earrings into my pocket. I take them to remind myself not to do this again. I almost believe it will work.

I walk toward the front door without looking back.

"Are you really deaf?"

She says it out loud, to my back.

I hear her because I am not deaf.

And I keep moving.

I pretend I don't hear her, go straight to the door and shut it behind me, then continue until I am out of her building, down the block, and around the corner. It is only then that I stop and wonder how she figured it out. I must have slipped.

Two

MY NAME IS not Tobias. I use that name only when I want someone to remember me. In this case, the bartender. I introduced myself and typed out my name when I first walked in and ordered a drink. He will remember me. He will remember that Tobias is the deaf man who left the bar with a woman he just met. The name was for his benefit, not Petra's. She will remember me anyway, because how many deaf guys could she have slept with?

And if I hadn't made a mistake, I would have been an odd footnote in her sexual history. But now she will remember me as the "fake deaf guy" or the "possibly fake deaf guy."

The more I think about it, the more I wonder if I slipped twice. Maybe I froze when she asked if I was deaf. It's possible, because that's what people do when they hear something unexpected. And if I did, she probably saw it. She probably knows I lied.

On the drive back home, everything is uncomfortable. My car seat feels scratchy, and it hurts my back. Everything on the radio is too loud, almost like everyone is screeching. But I can't blame that all on Petra. I have been irritable for a while now.

At home, all is quiet. My wife, Millicent, is still in bed. I have been married to her for fifteen years, and she does not call me Tobias. We have two kids; Rory is fourteen, and Jenna is one year younger.

Our bedroom is dark, but I can just about see the shape of Millicent under the bedcovers. I take off my shoes and tiptoe toward the bathroom.

"Well?"

Millicent sounds wide-awake.

I half turn and see the shadow of her propped up on an elbow.

There it is again. The choice. From Millicent, a rarity.

"No," I say.

"No?"

“She isn’t right.”

The air between us freezes. It doesn’t thaw until Millicent exhales and lays her head back down.

• • •

SHE GETS UP before I do. By the time I walk into the kitchen, Millicent is organizing breakfast, school lunches, the day, our lives.

I know should tell her about Petra. Not about the sex—I wouldn’t tell my wife about that. But I should tell her that I made a mistake and that Petra is right for us. I should do it because it’s a risk to leave Petra out there.

Instead, I say nothing.

Millicent looks at me, her disappointment hitting like a physical force. Her eyes are green, many shades of green, and they look like camouflage.

They are nothing like Petra’s. Millicent and Petra have nothing in common, except they’ve both slept with me. Or some version of me.

The kids tumble down the stairs, already yelling at each other, fighting over who said what about so-and-so at school yesterday. They are dressed and ready for school, just as I am dressed for work in my tennis whites. I am not and never have been an accountant.

While my kids are in school and my wife is selling houses, I am outside on the court, in the sun, teaching people how to play tennis. Most of my clients are middle-aged and out of shape, with too much money and time. Occasionally, I am hired by parents who believe their child is a prodigy, a champion, a future role model. So far, they have all been wrong.

But before I can leave to teach anyone anything, Millicent makes us all sit together for at least five minutes. She calls it breakfast.

Jenna rolls her eyes, taps her feet, anxious to get her phone back. No phones are allowed at the table. Rory is calmer than his sister. He makes the most of our five minutes by eating as much as possible, then stuffing his pockets with whatever doesn’t fit in his mouth.

Millicent sits across from me, a cup of coffee perched at her lips. She is dressed for work in a skirt, blouse, and heels, and her red hair is pulled back. The morning sun makes it look like copper. We are the

same age, but she looks better—always has. She is the woman I should not have been able to get.

My daughter taps my arm in a pattern, like the beat to a song, and she continues until I pay attention to her. Jenna does not look like her mother. Her eyes, her hair, and the shape of her face come from me, and sometimes this makes me sad. Other times not.

“Dad, can you take me to get new shoes today?” she says. She is smiling, because she knows I will say yes.

“Yes,” I say.

Millicent kicks me under the table. “Those shoes are a month old,” she says to Jenna.

“But they’re too tight now.”

Not even my wife can argue with that.

Rory asks if he can go play his video game for a few minutes before school.

“No,” Millicent says.

He looks at me. I should say no, but now I can’t, not after I said yes to his sister. He knows this, because Rory is the smart one. He is also the one who looks like Millicent.

“Go ahead,” I say.

He races off.

Millicent slams down her coffee cup.

Jenna picks up her phone.

We are done with breakfast.

Before getting up from the table, Millicent glares at me. She looks exactly like my wife and, at the same time, nothing like her.

• • •

I FIRST SAW Millicent in an airport. I was twenty-two and on my way back from Cambodia, where I had spent the summer with three friends. We got high every day and drunk every night, and we never shaved. I left the country as a clean-cut kid from the suburbs and returned as a shaggy, bearded man with a deep tan and some great stories. None compare to Millicent.

I was on a layover, my first back in the country. I went through customs and was heading to the domestic terminal when I saw her. Millicent was sitting in at an empty gate area, alone, with her feet propped up on her suitcase. She was staring out of the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the tarmac. Her red hair was knotted into a loose bun, and she was wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. I stopped to watch her as she watched the planes.

It was the way she looked out the window.

I had done the same thing when I set off on my trip. My dream had been to travel, to see places like Thailand and Cambodia and Vietnam, and I did. Now I was back on familiar ground, back to where I had grown up, but my parents were gone. Although I am not sure they were ever really there. Not for me.

When I returned, my dream of traveling had been fulfilled but not replaced with another. Not until I saw Millicent. She looked like she was just beginning her own dream. In that moment, I wanted to be a part of it.

At the time, I didn't think of all this. I came up with it later, when I tried to explain it to her or anyone else why I found her so attractive. But back then, I continued to my next gate. After traveling for twenty hours with still more to go, I couldn't even muster up the energy to speak to her. All I could do was admire.

It turned out we were on the same flight. I took it as a sign.

She had a window seat, and mine was in the center of the middle row. It took a little convincing, some flirting with a flight attendant and a twenty-dollar bill, to get my seat moved next to Millicent. She did not look up when I sat down.

By the time the drink cart came by, I had come up with a plan. I would order whatever she ordered, and, because I had already decided she was special, I could not imagine her ordering anything as mundane as water. It would be something more unusual, like pineapple juice with ice, and when I ordered the same thing we would have a moment of symmetry, symbiosis, serendipity—it didn't matter what.

Given how long it had been since I had slept, this plan sounded plausible in my head right up until Millicent told the flight attendant thanks but no thanks. She did not want a drink.

I said the same thing. It didn't have the effect I wanted.

But when Millicent turned to the flight attendant, I saw her eyes for the first time. The color reminded me of the lush, open fields I had seen all over Cambodia. They were not nearly as dark as they look now.

She went back to staring out the window. I went back to staring at her while pretending I wasn't.

I told myself I was an idiot and I should just talk to her.

I told myself there was something wrong with me, because normal people didn't act like this over a girl they had never seen before.

I told myself not to be a stalker.

I told myself she was too beautiful for me.

With thirty minutes left on the flight, I spoke.

"Hi."

She turned. Stared. "Hi."

I think that's when I stopped holding my breath.

Years passed before I asked why she kept staring out the windows, both in the airport and on the plane. She said it was because she had never flown before. The only thing she had been dreaming about was a safe landing.

Three

PETRA WAS NUMBER one on the list, but now that she's been eliminated I move on to the next, a young woman named Naomi George. I haven't spoken to her yet.

In the evening, I drive to the Lancaster Hotel. Naomi works as a front desk clerk at the Lancaster, one of those old-world places that survives because of its past glory. The building is huge and so grand in decor it could never be built today. It would be too expensive to do right and too cheesy if done wrong.

The front of the hotel has glass doors and side panels, offering a good view of the front desk. Naomi stands behind it wearing the Lancaster uniform, a blue skirt and jacket, both trimmed in gold braid, and a crisp white blouse. She has long dark hair, and the freckles on her nose make her look younger than she is. Naomi is twenty-seven. She probably still gets carded in bars but is not as innocent as she looks.

Late at night, I have seen her get a little too friendly with more than one male guest. They have all been alone, older, and well dressed, and she doesn't always leave the hotel when her shift ends. Either Naomi has been making extra money on the side or she has aspirational one-night stands.

Because of social media, I know that her favorite food is sushi but she won't eat red meat. In high school, she played volleyball and had a boyfriend named Adam. Now he is referred to as The Cretin. Her last boyfriend, Jason, moved away three months ago, and she has been single ever since. Naomi has been thinking about getting a pet, probably a cat, but she hasn't yet. She has more than a thousand online friends, but from what I can tell, Naomi has just two close friends. Three at the most.

I'm still not sure she is the one. I need to know more.

Millicent is tired of waiting.

Last night, I found Millicent in our bathroom, standing in front of the mirror, taking off her makeup. She was wearing jeans and a T-shirt proclaiming her the mother of a seventh-grade honor student. Jenna, not Rory.

“What was wrong with her?” she said. Millicent does not use Petra’s name because she does not have to. I know who she means.

“She just wasn’t the one.”

Millicent didn’t look at me in the mirror. She smoothed lotion on her face. “That’s the second one you’ve eliminated.”

“She has to be right. You know that.”

She snapped the lid of her lotion bottle closed. I went to the bedroom and sat down to take off my shoes. The day had been long and needed to end, but Millicent wouldn’t let it. She followed me into the bedroom and stood over me.

“Are you sure you still want to do this?” she said.

“Yes.”

I was too busy feeling guilty about sleeping with another woman to show much enthusiasm. It had hit me in the afternoon, when I saw a little old couple; they had to be at least ninety years old, and they held hands as they walked down the street. Couples like that didn’t cheat on each other. I looked up at Millicent and wished I could make us become like that.

Millicent knelt in front of me and placed a hand on top of my knee. “We need to do this.”

Her eyes flickered, the warmth from her hand spreading as it inched up my leg. “You’re right,” I said. “We do need this.”

She leaned closer and kissed me long and deep. It made me feel guiltier. And it made me want to do whatever will make her happy.

• • •

LESS THAN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS later, I am sitting in front of the Lancaster Hotel. Naomi’s shift does not end until eleven, and I cannot just sit outside the hotel for the next three hours. Instead of going home, I get something to eat and then sit in a bar. It’s a convenient place to go when there is nowhere else.

The place I have chosen is half-full, mostly with men who are alone. It's not as nice as the bar I was in with Petra. The cocktails cost half as much, and anyone wearing a suit has already loosened their tie. The wood floor is patterned with scrapes from the barstools, and watermark rings decorate the bar. This is a place for drinkers, by drinkers, a place where everyone is too inebriated for details.

I order a beer and watch a baseball game on one screen and the news on another.

Bottom of the third, two outs. Rain tomorrow, maybe, but then again it might be sunny. It is always sunny here in Woodview, Florida, a so-called enclave from the real world. In about an hour, we can be at the ocean, in a state park, or at one of the biggest amusement parks in the world. We always say how lucky we are to live here in central Florida, especially those of us who live in the Hidden Oaks subdivision. The Oaks are an enclave from the enclave.

Top of the fourth inning, one out. Still two more hours until Naomi's shift ends and I can follow her.

And then, Lindsay.

Her smiling face stares at me from the TV screen.

Lindsay, with her narrow brown eyes and straight blond hair, her outdoorsy tan and big white teeth.

She went missing a year ago. For a week, she was a blip on the news, and then the story was gone. Without any close family to keep her on TV, no one paid attention. Lindsay wasn't a missing child; she wasn't defenseless. She was a grown woman, and in less than seven days she was forgotten.

Not by me. I still remember her laugh. It was infectious enough to make me laugh along with her. Seeing her again makes me remember how much I liked her.

Four

I FIRST SPOKE to Lindsay while on a hike. One Saturday morning, I followed her to the hilly trails just outside town. She started on one trail, I started on another, and an hour later we ran into each other.

When she saw me, Lindsay nodded and said hello in a way that did not invite further conversation. I waved and mouthed hello. Unconsciously, she gave me an odd look, and I handed her my phone to introduce myself.

Sorry, that probably looked strange! Hello, my name is Tobias. I am deaf.

I watched her guard drop.

She introduced herself, we talked, and then we sat down to drink some water and she offered me a snack. Pixy Stix. She had a handful of them.

Lindsay rolled her eyes at herself. "That's terrible, right? Eating sugar while exercising? But I love them."

So do I.

It was the truth. I hadn't eaten Pixy Stix since I was a kid, but I loved them.

She told me about herself, about the job, house, and hobbies I already knew about. I told her the same stories I told all of them. As the morning sun rose, we decided to finish our hike together. We were silent most of the way, and I liked it. My life was almost never silent.

She declined my invitation to lunch, but we did exchange numbers. I gave her the number to the phone I use when I am Tobias.

Lindsay texted me once, a few days after the hike. Hearing from her made me smile.

It was great to meet you last week, hope we can hike together sometime.

We did.

A different trail the second time, farther north and near Indian Lake State Forest. She brought the Pixy Stix again; I brought a blanket. We

stopped to rest in an area where the sun was blocked by heavy foliage. As we sat down, I smiled at her, and it was real.

“You’re cute,” she said.

No, you’re the cute one.

She texted a few days later, and I ignored it. By then, Millicent and I had agreed that Lindsay was the one.

Now, a year later, Lindsay is back on TV. They found her.

• • •

I GO STRAIGHT home from the bar. Millicent is already there, sitting on the front porch. She is still dressed in work clothes, and her patent leather pumps match the color of her skin. She says they make her legs look longer, and I agree. I always notice when she is wearing them, even now.

After working all day and then being cooped up in the car watching Naomi, I realize how badly I need a shower. But Millicent doesn’t even turn up her nose when I sit down next to her. Before I can speak, she does.

“It’s not a problem.”

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“Positive.”

I do not know if this is true. We were supposed take care of Lindsay together, but it didn’t work out that way. And I don’t have any options to argue with.

“I don’t understand how—”

“It’s not a problem,” she says again. She points up, gesturing to the second floor of our house. The kids are home. I want to ask more, but I can’t.

“We have to wait on the next one,” I say. “We shouldn’t do anything now.”

She does not answer.

“Millicent?”

“I heard you.”

I want to ask her if she understands, but I know she does. She just doesn’t like it. She is upset Lindsay has been found now, right when we

were planning another. It's like she has become addicted.

She is not the only one.

• • •

WHEN I MET Millicent on the plane, it wasn't love at first sight. Not for her. It wasn't even mild interest. After saying hello, she looked away and continued staring out the window. I was right back where I'd started. I leaned back on the headrest, closed my eyes, and berated myself for not having the courage to say more.

"Excuse me."

My eyes flew open.

She was looking at me, her green eyes huge, forehead wrinkled.

"Are you okay?" she said.

I nodded.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I don't understand why you're—"

"Because you're knocking your head against this." She pointed to the headrest. "You're shaking the seat."

I hadn't even realized I was doing it. I thought all that mental berating was just that: mental. "I'm sorry."

"So you're okay?"

I recovered enough to realize the girl I had been staring at was now talking to me. She even looked concerned.

I smiled. "I'm okay, really. I was just—"

"Beating yourself up. I do the same thing."

"About what?"

She shrugged. "Lots of things."

I felt an urge to know everything that made this girl beat her head in frustration, but the landing gear had just dropped and we didn't have time. "Tell me one," I said.

She considered my question, even putting her index finger up to her lips. I bit back another smile, not just because it was cute but because I had her attention.

After the plane landed, she answered.

“Assholes,” she said. “Assholes on planes who hit on me when all I want is to be left alone.”

Without thinking, without even realizing she was talking about me, I said, “I can protect you from them.”

She stared at me, stunned. When she realized I was serious, she burst out laughing.

When I realized why she was laughing, I did the same thing.

By the time we walked up the jet bridge, we had not only introduced ourselves; we had exchanged phone numbers.

Before walking away, she said, “How?”

“How what?”

“How would you protect me from all those assholes on planes?”

“I would force them into the center seat, hog the armrests, and give them paper cuts with the emergency information card.”

She laughed again, longer and harder than she had before. I’m still not tired of hearing her laugh.

That conversation became part of us. The first Christmas we spent together, I gave her a huge box, big enough to fit a giant TV, all wrapped up and tied with a bow. The only thing inside was an emergency information card.

Every Christmas since, we have tried to come with up with the most creative reference to our inside joke. Once, I gave her an underseat life jacket. Another time, she redecorated our tree with drop-down oxygen masks.

Whenever I get on a plane and see that emergency card, I still smile.

The strange thing is, if I had to pick a moment, the exact moment everything went into motion and brought us to where we are now, I would have to say it was because of a paper cut.

It happened when Rory was eight years old. He had friends but not too many, a middle-of-the-road kid on the popularity scale, so it came as a surprise when a boy named Hunter gave Rory a paper cut. On purpose. They had been arguing about which superhero was strongest, when Hunter got mad and cut Rory. The cut was in the crease between

the thumb and index finger of his right hand. It was painful enough to make Rory scream.

Hunter was sent home for the day, and Rory went to see the nurse, who bandaged his hand and gave him a sugar-free lollipop. The pain had already been forgotten.

That night, after the kids were asleep, Millicent and I talked about the paper cut. We were in bed. She had just closed her laptop, and I turned off the TV. School had just started, and Millicent's summer tan hadn't completely faded. She didn't play tennis, but she loved to swim.

Millicent picked up my hand and rubbed the thin stretch of skin between my thumb and index finger. "Have you ever had a cut here?"

"No. You?"

"Yes. Hurt like hell."

"How did it happen?"

"Holly."

I knew very little about Holly. Millicent almost never talked about her older sister. "She cut you?" I asked.

"We were making collages of all our favorite things, and we cut pictures out of magazines and pasted them all on big pieces of construction paper. Holly and I reached for the same piece at the same time, and"—she shrugged—"I got cut."

"Did you scream?"

"I don't remember. But I cried."

I picked up her hand and kissed the long-healed cut. "What favorite things?" I asked.

"What?"

"You said you cut out pictures of your favorite things. What were they?"

"Oh no," she said, taking her hand back and turning out the light. "You're not going to turn this into another crazy Christmas thing."

"You don't like our crazy Christmas thing?"

"I love it. But we don't need another."

I knew we didn't. I was trying to avoid the subject of Holly, because Millicent didn't like to talk about her. That's why I asked about her

favorite things.

I should have asked about Holly.

Five

LINDSAY DOMINATES THE news. She is the only one who has been found, and the first surprise is where her body is found.

The last time I saw Lindsay, we were in the middle of nowhere. Millicent and I had taken her deep into the swamp near a nature preserve, hoping the wildlife would find her before any people did. Lindsay was still alive, and we were supposed to kill her together. That was the plan.

That was the point.

It didn't happen, because of Jenna. We had arranged for both kids to spend the night with friends; Rory was with a friend playing video games, and we had dropped Jenna off at a slumber party with half a dozen twelve-year-old girls. When Millicent's phone went off, it sounded like a kitten. That was Jenna's ring. Millicent answered before the second meow.

"Jenna? What's wrong?"

I watched Millicent listen, my heart beating a little faster with each nod of her head.

Lindsay was lying on the ground, her tanned legs sprawled out on the dirt. The drug we'd knocked her out with was wearing off, and she had started to move a little.

"Honey, can you pass the phone to Mrs. Sheehan?" Millicent said.

More nodding.

When Millicent spoke again, her voice had changed. "I understand. Thank you so much. I'll be right there." She hung up.

"What—"

"Jenna's sick. A stomach flu or maybe food poisoning. She's been in the bathroom for the past hour." Before I could answer, she said, "I'll go."

I shook my head. "I'll do it."

Millicent didn't protest. She looked down at Lindsay and back at me. "But—"

"I'll do it," I said. "I'll pick up Jenna and take her home."

"I can take care of her." Millicent was looking down at Lindsay. She was not talking about our daughter.

"Of course you can." I never had a doubt. I was just disappointed I had to miss it.

When I arrived at the Sheehans, Jenna was still sick. On the way home, I pulled over twice so she could throw up. I sat up with her most of the night.

Millicent returned home just before dawn. I didn't ask if she had moved Lindsay, because I assumed she had buried her in that deserted area. I have no idea how she ended up in room number 18 at the Moonlite Motor Inn.

The Moonlite closed when the new highway was built more than twenty years ago. The motel was abandoned and left to the elements, rodents, transients, and drug addicts. No one paid attention to it, because no one had to drive by it. Lindsay was found by some teenagers, who called the police.

The motel is a single strip of a building, one story, with rooms lining both sides. Room 18 is on the back side, in the corner and not visible from the road. As I watch aerial video of the motel on TV, I try to imagine Millicent driving around the back of the Moonlite and parking, getting out of the car, opening the trunk.

Dragging Lindsay across the ground.

I wonder if she is strong enough to do that. Lindsay was quite muscular from all those outdoor sports. Maybe Millicent used something to transport Lindsay. A cart, something with wheels. She is smart enough to do something like that.

The reporter is young and earnest; he speaks as if every word is important. He tells me that Lindsay had been wrapped in plastic, shoved into the closet, and covered with a blanket. The teenagers discovered her because they had been playing a drunken game of hide-and-seek. I don't know how long she has been in the closet, but the reporter does say Lindsay's body was initially identified with dental records. The DNA tests are pending. The police could not use fingerprints, because Lindsay's had been filed off.

I try not to imagine how Millicent did this, or that she did it at all, but it becomes the only thing I *can* imagine.

The images in my mind stay there. Still frames of Lindsay's smiling face, of her white teeth. Of my wife filing away Lindsay's fingertips. Of her dragging Lindsay's body into a motel room and shoving her in the closet. These all flash through my mind throughout the day, the evening, and as I try to go to sleep.

Millicent, however, looks normal. She looks the same when she gets home from work and throws together a salad, when she takes off her makeup, when she works on her computer before going to sleep. If she has been listening to the news, it doesn't show. A half dozen times, I start to ask her why or how Lindsay got into that motel.

I don't. Because all I can think about is why I have to ask. Why she didn't tell me.

The next day, she calls me in the middle of the afternoon, and the question is on the tip of my tongue. I am also starting to wonder if there is anything else I don't know.

"Remember," she says. "We have dinner with the Prestons tonight."

"I remember."

I do not remember. She knows this and tells me the name of the restaurant without my asking.

"Seven o'clock," she says.

"I'll meet you there."

• • •

ANDY AND TRISTA Preston bought their house from Millicent. Although Andy is a few years older than me, I've known him forever. He grew up in Hidden Oaks, we went to the same schools, and our parents knew one another. Now he works at a software firm, making enough money to take tennis lessons every day, but he doesn't—that's why he has a paunch.

But his wife takes lessons. Trista also grew up around here, but she's from the other part of Woodview, not the Oaks. We meet twice a week, and she spends the rest of her time working at an art gallery. Together, the Prestons make twice what we do.

Millicent knows how much all of her clients make, and most earn more than us. I have to admit that this bothers me more than it

bothers her. Millicent thinks it's because she makes more money than I do. She's wrong. It's because Andy makes more money than I do, though I do not tell her that. She is not from the Oaks; she doesn't understand what it's like to grow up here and then end up working here.

Our dinner is at an upscale restaurant where everyone eats salad, chicken, or salmon, and drinks red wine. Andy and Trista drink the whole bottle. Millicent doesn't really drink and hates it when I do. I don't drink around her.

"I envy you," Trista says to me. "I would love to have your job and be outside all day. I love playing tennis."

Andy laughs. His cheeks are red. "But you work in an art gallery. It's practically the same thing."

"Being outside all day and working outside all day are two different things," I say. "I'd love to sit around on the beach all day, doing nothing."

Trista scrunches up her pert nose. "I think that would be boring, just lying around like that. I'd rather be doing something."

I want to tell her that taking a tennis lesson and teaching them are two different things. At work, the great outdoors is the last thing on my mind. Most of my time is spent trying to teach tennis to people who would rather be on their phone, watching TV, getting drunk, or eating. I don't need even one finger to count the number of people who really want to play tennis, much less exercise. Trista is one of them. She doesn't really love tennis; she loves to look good.

But I keep my mouth shut, because that's what friends do. We don't point out each other's faults unless asked.

The talk shifts to Andy's work, and I tune it out, catching only key words, because I am distracted by the sound of silverware. Every time Millicent cuts a piece of grilled chicken, I think about her killing Lindsay.

"Attention," Andy says. "That's the only thing software companies care about. How can we get your attention, and how can we keep it? How can we make you sit in front of your computer all day?"

I roll my eyes. When Andy drinks, he tends to pontificate. Or lecture.