





SEVEN

DAYS

IN JUNE

TIA

a Novel

WILLIAMS



SEVEN DAYS IN JUNE

A Novel

TIA WILLIAMS



GRAND CENTRAL
PUBLISHING

NEW YORK BOSTON

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

Copyright © 2021 by Tia Williams

Cover design by Sarah Congdon. Cover photograph by Victor Torres/Stocksy. Cover copyright ©

2021 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Grand Central Publishing

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

grandcentralpublishing.com

twitter.com/grandcentralpub

First Edition: June 2021

Grand Central Publishing is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Grand Central Publishing name and logo is a trademark of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to www.hachettespeakersbureau.com or call (866) 376-6591.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Williams, Tia, 1975- author.

Title: Seven days in June : a novel / Tia Williams.

Description: First edition. | New York : Grand Central Publishing, 2021.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020054050 | ISBN 9781538719107 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781538719114 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PS3623.I566 S48 2021 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020054050>

ISBNs: 978-1-5387-1910-7 (hardcover), 978-1-5387-1911-4 (ebook)

E3-20210428-DA-PC-ORI

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

Dedication

Prologue

SUNDAY

Chapter 1: Bite Me

Chapter 2: Single-Mom Superhero

Chapter 3: Romantic Comedy

MONDAY

Chapter 4: Mantra

Chapter 5: Fun Black Shit

Chapter 6: Witch Trumps Monster

Chapter 7: You First

Chapter 8: Thus with a Kiss I Die

TUESDAY

Chapter 9: A Verbal Blush

Chapter 10: The Women

Chapter 11: An Aggressive Act of Personal Reinvention

Chapter 12: Twenty Questions

WEDNESDAY

Chapter 13: Pretty Sentimental

Chapter 14: Girling About

[Chapter 15: Dream House](#)

[Chapter 16: No Safe Thrill](#)

[THURSDAY](#)

[Chapter 17: An Unanswered Question](#)

[Chapter 18: A Series of Rash Decisions](#)

[Chapter 19: Heterosexual Men Love Me](#)

[FRIDAY](#)

[Chapter 20: It Was That Boy](#)

[Chapter 21: What a Coincidence](#)

[SATURDAY](#)

[Chapter 22: Word Traveled Fast](#)

[Chapter 23: That Family Feeling](#)

[Chapter 24: Fabulous History](#)

[SUNDAY](#)

[Chapter 25: DNA Ain't No Joke](#)

[Chapter 26: Seven Days in June](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More](#)

[Reading Group Guide for *Seven Days in June*](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)

[Author Questions](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Tia Williams](#)

For CC and FF, my loves.



Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

[Tap here to learn more.](#)

[Prologue](#)

IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 2019, THIRTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD EVA MERCY NEARLY choked to death on a piece of gum. She'd been attempting to masturbate when the gum

lodged in her throat, cutting off her air supply. As she slowly blacked out, she kept imagining her daughter, Audre, finding her flailing about in Christmas jammies while clutching a tube of strawberry lube and a dildo called the Quarterback (which vibrated at a much higher frequency than advertised— *gum-choking* frequency). The obituary headline would be “Death by Dildo.” Hell of a legacy to leave her orphaned twelve-year-old.

Eva didn't die, though. She eventually coughed up the gum. Shaken, she

buried the Quarterback in a drawer full of hip-hop concert tees, slipped on her ancient cameo ring, and padded down the hall to wake up Audre for her BFF's

Hamptons birthday party. She had no time to dwell on her brush with mortality.

While she'd admit to being a damn good mom and a capable novelist, Eva's true talent was her ability to push weird shit aside and get on with life. This time, she did it a little too well and missed the obvious.

When Eva Mercy was little, her mom had told her that Creole women see signs. This was back when Eva's only understanding of "Creole" was that it was

vaguely connected to Louisiana and Black people with French last names. It wasn't until junior high that she realized her mom was—what's a fair word?

— *eccentric* and curated "signs" to justify her whims. (*Mariah Carey released an album called Charmbracelet ? Let's blow rent on cubic zirconia charms at Zales!*) Point is, Eva was wired to believe that the universe sent her messages.

So it should've occurred to her to expect a life-altering drama after

Tridentgate. After all, she'd had a near-death experience before.

And that time—like this one—she woke up to her world forever changed.

[SUNDAY](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[BITE ME](#)

"A TOAST TO OUR SEX GODDESS, EVA MERCY!" HOLLERED A CHERUB OF a woman,

raising her champagne glass. Eva, whose throat was still raspy from yesterday's

gum incident, coughed back a snort at “sex goddess.”

The forty women crammed around long dining tables cheered loudly. They were bombed. The book club, composed of rowdy, upper-middle-class white

women on the business end of their fifties, had traveled from Dayton, Ohio, all

the way to Manhattan to celebrate Eva with a brunch. The occasion was the fifteenth anniversary of her bestselling (well, formerly bestselling) erotica series, *Cursed*.

Lacey, president of the chapter, adjusted her purple witch hat and turned to Eva, who was at the head of the table. “Today,” she bellowed, “we celebrate the

magical day we met our bronze-eyed vampire, Sebastian—and his true love, the

badass unwicked witch, Gia!”

The tables erupted in squeals. Eva was relieved that Times Square’s

deliriously cheesy S&M-themed restaurant, A Place of Yes, had provided a private room. And oh, what a room. The ceiling was awash in red velvet, and a

web of bondage ropes and riding crops decorated the walls. Goth candelabras dangled dangerously low over the black lacquered tables.

The Menu of Pain/Pleasure was *the* tourist attraction. Depending upon your selection, waitstaff in bondage gear would lightly flog you or do a lap dance or

whatever. If you so desired.

Eva did not desire. But she was a good sport, and the Real Housewives of Dayton had traveled such a long way. These were her people—the rabid fandom

who kept her afloat. Especially recently, as the vampire phenomenon (and her book sales) had cooled off.

So Eva chose “Cuffs + Cookies” off the menu. And now she was seated on a

gothic throne, her hands cuffed behind the chair while a bored waitress in a pleather corset fed her snickerdoodles.

It was 2:45 p.m.

She should’ve been mortified. But she was no stranger to this scene. After all,

Eva did write supermarket-checkout porn. While most authors had speaking engagements at bookstores, universities, and chic private homes, Eva’s events were, well, raunchier. She’d done signings at sex shops, burlesque clubs, and tantric workshops. She’d even sold books at the 2008 Feminists in Adult Film (FAFFIES) after-party.

This was the gig. She smiled indulgently while her readers swooned over the

two horny, dysfunctional permanently nineteen-year-old basket cases she’d invented when she herself was a horny, dysfunctional nineteen-year-old basket case.

Eva had never set out for her name to be synonymous with witches, vampires,

and orgasms. As a double major in creative writing and advanced melancholia,

Eva had accidentally stumbled upon this life. It was sophomore year, winter break. She had nowhere to go. So she holed up in her dorm room, pouring her

teen angst and horror-fan daydreams into a violent lustfest—which her

roommate secretly submitted to *Jumpscare* magazine's New Fiction contest. She got first prize and a literary agent. Three months later, Eva was a college dropout

with a six-figure multiple-book deal.

Ironic that she made a living writing about sexy sex. Eva couldn't remember

the last time she got naked with anyone, undead or otherwise. Between

authoring, touring, single-mothering a tween tornado, and fighting through a chronic illness that ranged from manageable to utterly debilitating, she was too

depleted to romance a real-life penis.

Which was fine. When Eva had an itch, she scratched it in her books. Like a boxer abstaining before the big match, she used her unconsummated lust to give

Sebastian and Gia's story a wild edge. It was fiction ammunition.

But in the social-media era, nobody wanted to picture their favorite erotica author zonked on painkillers, drooling on her couch by 9:25 every night. So in

public, Eva looked the part. She had her own tomboy-chic take on sexy. Today,

it was a gray T-shirt minidress, Adidas, vintage gold hoops, and smudged black

liner. With her signature sexy secretary glasses and collarbone-length curls, she

could almost convince anyone she was a man-killer.

Eva was brilliant at faking things.

“...and bless you,” continued Lacey, “for instilling our faith in passion, even

though Gia and Sebastian are bound by an ancient curse to wake up on opposite

sides of the world the moment after orgasm. You gave us a community. An OBSESH. Can’t wait for *Cursed, Book Fifteen!*”

Amid applause, Eva smiled brightly and attempted to rise. Unfortunately, she

forgot she was handcuffed to the chair, and she was abruptly yanked back down.

Everyone gasped as Eva plummeted to the floor. Her dominatrix-waitress sprang

to action two seconds too late, uncuffing her from the overturned chair.

“Whoa, too much merlot,” giggled Eva, popping back up. It was a lie; she couldn’t drink alcohol with her health issues. Two sips would land her in the ER.

Eva raised her glass of seltzer up at the sea of happily wasted boomers. Most

of them, like Lacey, were wearing Gia’s signature purple witch hat. A handful had a blingy *S* pendant pinned to their Chico’s blouses. It was Sebastian’s *S*, meant

to

emulate

the

vampire's

scrawled

signature

(\$29.99

at

evamercymercyme.com).

Eva had the same *S* branded on her forearm. A regrettable decision made years ago on a blurry night by a blurry girl.

"I can't thank you enough," she gushed. "Really, your support keeps the *Cursed* world turning. I hope book fifteen lives up to your expectations."

If I ever write it. The manuscript was due in a week, and paralyzed with writer's block, she'd barely cobbled together five chapters.

Swiftly, she changed the subject. "So, does anyone read *Variety*?"

This was a *Redbook* and *Martha Stewart Living* crowd, so no.

"Exciting news broke yesterday." Eva sat down her glass and clasped her black-manicured fingers under her chin. "Our wish was granted. *Cursed* has been optioned for film rights!"

There were shrieks. Someone threw a witch hat in the air. A flushed blonde whipped out her iPhone and recorded Eva's speech so she could post it to *Cursed*'s Facebook fan page later. Along with several Tumblr and Twitter

fan accounts, Facebook was a deeply important book-promo platform for Eva, where

her readers shared fan art, gossiped, wrote obscene fan fiction, and debated casting decisions for the movie they'd fantasized about for years.

"I landed a producer"— *a Black female producer, thank you, Jesus*—"who really gets our world. Her last film was a steamy Sundance short about a real estate agent seducing a werewolf! We're interviewing directors now."

"Sebastian on film! Imagine?" swooned a faux redhead. "We just need a Black actor with bronze eyes. One who's a good biter."

"Eva, how do I ask my husband to bite me?" whined a Meryl Streep look-alike. This always happened, the sex talk.

"Arousal through biting is a thing, you know. It's called odaxelagnia," Eva divulged. "Just tell him you want it. Whisper it in his ear."

"*Odaxelagnia me*," slurred Meryl.

"Catchy," Eva said with a wink.

"I'm stoked to see big-screen Gia," said a husky-voiced brunette. "She's such

a fearless warrior. Sebastian's supposed to be the scary one, but she's killed armies of vampire hunters to protect him."

"Right? The force of teen-girl passion could power nations." With a twinkle in her eye, Eva launched into the mini-monologue she'd perfected ages ago. This

part was still fun. "We're taught that men are all animal impulse and id. But girls

get there first.”

“And then society stomps it out,” said the brunette.

“Word.” Eva knew the pain was close. Before an episode, her mask slipped and the Black popped out.

“Look at history,” Eva continued, rubbing a temple. “Roxanne Shanté out-rapping grown men at fourteen. Serena winning the US Open at seventeen. Mary

Shelley writing *Frankenstein* at eighteen. Josephine Baker conquering Paris at nineteen. Zelda Fitzgerald’s high school diary was so fire that her future husband

stole *entire passages* to write *The Great Gatsby*. The eighteenth-century poet Phillis Wheatley published her first piece at fourteen, while enslaved. Joan of Arc. Greta Thunberg. Teen girls rearrange the fucking world.”

An electrified hush fell over the group. But Eva was sinking. The pounding in

her temples was sharpening by the millisecond. Sugar triggered her condition, and she’d been force-fed all those cookies. She knew better—but she’d been cuffed.

Absentmindedly, Eva snapped the rubber band she always wore around her right wrist. It was a pain distraction. An old trick.

“Remember when Kate Winslet escapes the *Titanic*?” asked the brunette.

“*And then jumps back on* to be with Leo? That’s teen-girl passion.”

“I’d do that today to get to Leo,” admitted Lacey, “and I’m forty-one.” She was fifty-five.

“Just like Gia,” gasped a petite woman with a clip-on bun. “In every book, she fights her way back to Sebastian—despite knowing that when they have sex,

they’re cursed to lose each other again.”

“It’s a metaphor,” said Eva, her vision blurring. “No matter how perilous the

journey, it’s never over for true soul mates. Who *doesn’t* want a connection that burns forever, despite distance, time, and curses?”

She didn’t. The thought of perilous love made her nauseous.

“Confession,” whispered a flushed blonde on her fourth glass of rosé. “My son plays Ohio State basketball, and I get so horny during games. To me, all those beautiful Black players are Sebastian.”

Speechless, Eva gulped down her seltzer.

This’ll be my legacy, she thought. I have friends organizing protest rallies and writing Pulitzer Prize–winning New Yorker essays on race in America. My own daughter’s so militant that she begged a cop to arrest her at the Middle School March on Midtown. But my contribution to these troubled times will be

inciting white women of a certain age to sexually profile Black student athletes who’d really just like to make it to the NBA in peace.

Then Eva’s head was seized by a thunderous hammering. She clutched the edge of her seat with trembling fingers, bracing herself for each blow. The world

went fuzzy. Features were melting off faces like Dalí’s clocks; the competing perfumes in the room made her stomach lurch, and then the hammer slammed into her face harder and faster, aiming to maim, and she heard everything at a punishing decibel—the AC, clanging silverware, and merciful Christ, did

someone open a candy wrapper in Connecticut?

They always escalated so fast, the ruthlessly violent migraines that had tortured her since childhood and baffled the most decorated specialists on the East Coast.

Eva's eyelids started to droop. In a well-practiced fake-out, she raised her brows to look alert, shooting a dazzling smile at her audience. Looking at those

bawdy broads, she felt the low-grade envy she always felt in a group. They were

normal. They could do things.

Regular-ass things. Like diving headfirst into a pool. Holding up their end of

a conversation for more than twenty minutes. Burning scented candles. Getting

tipsy. Surviving an F-train ride while a subway saxophonist blared "Ain't Nobody" for nine stops. Enjoying sex in ambitious positions. Laughing too heartily. Crying too mightily. Breathing too deeply. Walking too swiftly.

Living, period. She'd bet these women could do most of these things without

shredding agony smiting them like punishment from an angry god. What was it

like, the luxury of not hurting?

I'm an alien, Eva thought. She'd always felt as if she were impersonating a human, and she accepted it. But she'd never stop fantasizing about being unsick.

“Uhhh...excuse me for a sec,” Eva managed. “J-just need to call my daughter.”

Calmly clutching her tote, she swept through the red velvet door of the private room. Weaving through tables of suburban theatergoers gushing over

Hamilton, she spotted the ladies’ lounge behind the hostess area. She rushed in, burst into a handicapped stall with a sink, and vomited into the toilet.

For moments afterward, Eva stood there, breathing deeply through the pain, the way her team of neurologists, acupuncturists, and Eastern healers had taught

her. Then she vomited again.

Swaying, she grasped the sink rim for balance. Her eyeliner was a mess now.

This was why she wore it smudged. She never knew when an episode would

strike—so if her makeup aesthetic was Rihanna-at-3:00-a.m., then she could

pretend it was intentional.

Eva pulled her box of disposable painkiller injections out of her bag. Yanking

up her dress, she exposed her scar-addled thigh, jabbed in a needle, and tossed it

in the trash. For good measure, she grabbed an Altoids tin and chose a medical-

marijuana gummy bear (prescribed by NYC’s top pain specialist, thank you very

much). She chomped off an ear. *Fuck it*, she thought and tossed the whole thing in her mouth. This would take the edge off until nighttime, so she could get through mommy-daughter after-school rituals and then crash.

Gingerly, Eva leaned back against the tiled wall. Her lids shuttered closed.

Sickness wasn't sexy. And her disability was invisible—she wasn't missing a

limb or in a full-body cast. Her level of suffering seemed impossible for others

to fathom. After all, everyone got headaches sometimes, like during coffee withdrawal or the flu. So she hid it. All people knew was that Eva canceled plans

a lot (“Busy writing!”). And was prone to fainting, like at Denise and Todd’s wedding (“Too much prosecco!”). Or forgot words midsentence (“Sorry, just

distracted”). Or disappeared for weeks at a time (“Writing retreat!”—definitely not an in-patient stay in Mount Sinai’s pain ward).

White lies were easier than the truth.

Case in point: what would the Orgasmic Ohioans think if they knew she

wanted to strangle Sebastian and Gia? To banish them to wherever those

Twilight fuckers went?

She loved her books at first. She wrote to tickle herself, the ideas sparking like wildfire. Then she wrote for her readers. Now she lifted entire plot points from the comments sections of *Cursed* fansites—the depth of author-cheating.

She just couldn't peddle “tortured romance” anymore. Years ago, she'd

thought love wasn't real unless it drew blood. She, Sebastian, and Gia were all

teens once, sharing the same twisted brain. Sebastian and Gia didn't grow up.

But Eva did.

She wanted *Cursed* to die, but the series provided a stable, secure life for Audre. Eva had fought dragons to spare her baby from the childhood she'd had.

And she'd won. She just wished she could find her spark again. The movie might help her rescue it.

Not only that, but deep down, Eva hoped it'd give her a fresh start. With her cut from the deal, she could finally afford to take a break from writing *Cursed* and work on her dream book, the one that'd been buzzing under her skin forever.

She was so much more than her silly, raunchy romance (at least, she hoped she

was). It was time for her to prove it to herself.

Feeling a bit better, Eva rinsed her mouth out with her travel-size mouthwash.

Almost unconsciously, she raised her left middle finger, where she always wore

her vintage cameo ring (she felt naked without it), to her nose and inhaled. It was

an old habit—the barely there scent of some long-ago woman's perfume always

soothed her.

Finally, in a quiet moment, she decided to check her phone.

Today, 12:45 PM

Queen Cece

MA'AM. Where are you? As your editor, I HOPE you're writing. As your best friend, I DEMAND you take a break. HUGE NEWS. Text back.

Today, 1:11 PM

Sidney the Producer

Been trying to get you for 3 hours! I think I found our director! Call me.

Today, 2:40 PM

My Baby

did u get me the feathers 4 my #feministicon art project I need it 4 grandma's portrait specifically her hair it was so fluffy thx mama enjoy ur cringey sex luncheon xo

Today, 3:04 PM

Jackie, the Weirdly Hypochondriac Sitter I Only Use 4

Emergencies

Audre's home from the Debate Team pizza lunch. But she brought 20 kids with her. I noted on my ChildCare.com profile that I don't do large groups. (Agoraphobia, germaphobia, claustrophobia).

"Jesus, Audre," she moaned.

Light-headed from her gummy-and-injection cocktail, she scheduled an Uber,

offered her apologies to the Ohio Players, and was Brooklyn-bound in six minutes.

Chapter 2

SINGLE-MOM SUPERHERO

“JACKIE! WHERE’S AUDRE?”

Breathless, Eva stood in the doorway of her apartment. She took a cursory sweep of the bright, eclectic space. Her Indonesian (via HomeGoods) throw pillows and rugs were in their rightful place. Not a book was askew in the wall-

to-wall library behind the purple armoire she’d bought when Prince died. Her Pinterest-inspired Park Slope home was exactly how she’d left it.

Park Slope was a hippie-dippie Brooklyn hood, thoroughly gentrified with

wealthy liberal families. Most of the parents had kids when they were in their late thirties, after having conquered careers in new media, advertising,

publishing, or in one celebrated case, *Frozen* songwriting. Mostly white, the hood *felt* diverse because of its sprinkling of same-sex parents and biracial kids (in predominantly Asian-Jewish, Black-Jewish, or Asian-Black combos).

Eva and Audre stood out because (a) Eva was a decade younger than the other moms; (b) she was single; and (c) Audre had a Black mom and a Black father, as opposed to her dad being Jewish or Vietnamese. Or a woman.

“Oh, hey.” Jackie, the babysitter, was chilling on the couch with her feet propped on a boho ottoman.

“Jackie, I was *working*! I ran here from Times Square!”

“On foot?” Jackie, a divinity student at Columbia, was very literal.

Eva stared at her.

“Audre’s in her room with the kids. On Snapchat.”

Eva squeezed her eyes shut and fisted her hands. “*Audre Zora Toni Mercy-Moore!*”

She heard murmurs bubbling from Audre’s bedroom, down the short hallway.

Then a crash. Giggles. Finally, Audre cracked the door and slipped out, grinning

guiltily.

At twelve, Audre was Eva’s height, with her dimples, curls, and rich hazelnut

complexion. But she took her style cues from Willow Smith and Yara Shahidi, hence the two space buns atop her head, tie-dye crop top, cutoffs, and Filas.

With her mile-long lashes and gawky frame, she looked like Bambi at her first

Coachella.

Audre galloped over to her mother, giving her a hearty hug.

“Mommy! Are those my jeans? You look so cuuute.” Pronounced *kyuuu*, no *t*.

Eva disentangled herself from Audre's grasp. "Did I say you could bring the entire debate team home?"

"But...we're just..."

"You think I don't know what you're doing?" Eva lowered her voice. "Did you charge them?"

Audre sputtered.

"Did. You. Charge. Them."

"IT'S AN EXCHANGE OF GOODS, MOM! I provide counseling services and they pay me! Everyone at Cheshire Prep is addicted to my Snapchat therapy

sessions. The one when I cured Delilah's fear of flying coach? I'm a legend."

"You're a child. When you're sleepy, you still pronounce 'breakfast' *breckfix*."

Audre groaned. "Look, when I'm a celebrity therapist making several mil a year, we'll giggle about this over bubble tea."

"I told you to stop this therapy business," hissed Eva. "I don't send you to that fancy private school to hustle white children out of their lunch money."

"Reparations," said Jackie from the couch.

Eva jumped, forgetting that the babysitter was still there. Sensing her dismissal, Jackie scurried out the door while Audre murdered her with her eyeballs.

She whipped her head around to her mother and said, “I’m too old for a babysitter! And Jackie is the *entire worst*, with her judgmental eyes and Crocs with socks.”

“Audre,” started Eva, rubbing a temple. “What do I always say?”

“Resist, persist, insist,” she recited.

“What else?”

“I’ve never been sleepier than I am at this moment.”

“WHAT ELSE?”

Audre sighed, defeated. “I trust you, you trust me.”

“Right. When you break my rules, I can’t trust you. You’re grounded. No devices for two weeks.”

Audre shrieked. The noise reverberated in Eva’s head for thirty seconds.

“NO PHONE? What am I gonna do?”

“Who knows? Read *Goosebumps* and write poems to Usher, like I did at your age.”

Eva stormed down the hall and entered Audre’s room. Twenty girls were crammed on the bunk beds and floor, a blur of spring-break-tanned skin and crop tops.

“Hi, girls! You know you’re always welcome here if Audre asks my

permission. But she didn't, so...time to go." Eva beamed, careful not to disrupt

her standing as "cool mom," which wasn't supposed to matter but did.

"We'll host a sleepover soon," promised Eva. "It'll be lit!"

"Tell me you didn't just say 'lit,'" wailed Audre from the living room.

One by one, the girls filed out of the bedroom. Audre stood slumped next to the front door, a droopy weeping willow of misery. She pulled a wad of cash out

of her back pocket, and as the girls left, Audre handed each one her rightful twenty dollars. A few of the girls hugged her. It was like a funeral procession.

"Whoa!" Eva noticed a blond boy attempting to sneak out with the crowd. He

rose to his full height—a full three heads taller than Eva.

"Who are you?"

"Omigod, Mom. That's Coco-Jean's stepbrother."

"You're Coco-Jean's stepbrother? Why are you so tall?"

"I'm sixteen."

"You're in high school?" Eva glared at Audre, who sprinted down the hall and flung herself on her bottom bunk.

"Yeah, but I'm chill. I'm in the honors program at Dalton."

"Oh, I'm bathed in relief. Why are you hanging out with twelve-year-olds?"

“Audre’s, like, a really gifted mental health specialist. She’s helping me manage the anxiety I feel due to my gluten allergy.”

“Quick question. Did my daughter diagnose this gluten allergy?”

“He breaks out whenever he eats focaccia or crostini!” Audre yelled from her

bedroom. “What would *you* call that?”

“Listen, you seem like a nice”—*gullible*—“kid, but you being here in my home without my knowledge is a hard no.”

“I can’t believe I missed my hip-hop violin lesson for this,” he grumbled, storming out.

Eva leaned against the door for a moment, trying to decide how deeply she was going to freak out. In these moments, she wished she had the kind of mom

she could call for advice.

She had an ex-husband, but she couldn’t call him for advice, either. Troy Moore, a Pixar animator, had two settings: cheerful and really cheerful.

Complicated emotions upset his worldview. It was why Eva had fallen for him.

He’d been a ray of light, back when everything in Eva’s world had been dark.

She had literally tripped over him in the lobby of Mount Sinai Hospital. Troy

had been a volunteer, sketching portraits for patients. She’d realized she liked him when she scrambled to hide the IV bruises on her arms (as a result of her weeklong stay upstairs). After six weeks of rom-com-cute dates, they wed in city

hall. Audre was born seven months later. But by then, they'd unraveled.
The girl

Troy had fallen for, the one who could sustain bubbly spontaneity on dates
and

lusty sleepovers, was different at home. Dazed from pain and pills. And
soon her

illness overwhelmed Troy's life—killing patience, choking love.

Troy belonged to the Church of Just Think Good Thoughts. Despite
watching

Eva suffer—the nights she'd repeatedly smash her forehead against the

headboard in her sleep, or the time she fainted into a *2 Fast, 2 Furious*
display at Blockbuster—he believed the real issue was her outlook.
Couldn't she meditate

it away? Send positive energy into the universe? (This always baffled Eva.
The

universe *where*? Could he provide cross streets? Would someone greet the
positive energy when it landed, and would the greeter be Lena Horne's
Glinda in

The Wiz like she imagined?)

Once, after a late night at Pixar, Troy climbed into bed next to his fetal-
positioned wife. She'd just given herself a Toradol injection in the thigh,
and a

little blood had leaked through her Band-Aid onto their dove-gray sheets.

Moving was excruciating, so Eva just lay in it. Through slitted eyes, she
saw revulsion, and just beneath it, martyrdom.

She was gross. Cute girls weren't supposed to be gross. Quietly, Troy snuck

out and slept on the couch—and never returned to their bed. In their one couples’-counseling session, he admitted the truth.

“I wanted a wife,” he wept. “Not a patient.”

Troy was too polite to end it. So Eva liberated him. Audre was nineteen months old; she was twenty-two.

Troy went on to be blissfully happy with his second wife, a yogi named

Athena Marigold. They used words like “paleo” and “artisanal” and lived in Santa Monica, where Audre spent her summers. Next Sunday, she was flying out

to “Dadifornia” (the name Audre gave her West Coast trips), where Troy excelled as a carefree summertime dad.

But tricky stuff? An *almost man* sneaking into his baby’s room? Not his territory.

Eva staggered to her couch. She’d never been able to think clearly with jeans

on, so she wriggled out of them. Sitting there in Wonder Woman panties, she googled TWEEN DISCIPLINE TIPS on her phone. The top article suggested a

“behavior contract.” She had neither the legal prowess nor the energy to draw up

a contract! Huffing, she tossed her phone aside and clicked on the Apple TV.

When life got too challenging, she watched *Insecure*.

“Mommy?”

She looked up, and there was Audre, framed by a 120-year-old arched

entryway. Her face was puffy and tear streaked. She'd added a black shawl and

oversized Ray-Bans to her outfit.

Eva tried to look stern. Tough work without pants.

"Audre, what are you wearing?"

"This is my Upscale Sadness outfit."

"Nailed it," Eva admitted.

Audre cleared her throat. "Therapy is my calling. But I should've closed my practice when you told me to. I'm sorry for that and for having Coco-Jean's brother over. Though it's heterotypical of you to assume that just 'cause he's a

boy we're being...weird."

Heterotypical. Brooklyn private schools produced ultra-progressive students.

They protested abortion bans and marched for gun control. Last month, Audre's

seventh-grade class carried buckets of water two miles across Prospect Park to empathize with the plight of sub-Saharan women.

The upside? A top-notch liberal education. The downside? Kids who struggled to divide decimals or name a state capital.

"Honey, can you give me a sec?" Eva sighed, shutting her eyes. "I just need to think."

Audre knew that “think” meant “rest her head,” and she sulked back into her

room. Watching her through one open eye, Eva felt a wistful pang. Audre had been the dreamiest, most delightful kid. Now she was an eye roll shaped like a

human. Thirteen was coming, and who knew what horrors it’d bring? She’d sneak out, or learn to lie, or discover weed. Not Eva’s, though, which was well

hidden in her dildo drawer.

Just then, her phone buzzed. It was Cece Sinclair, Eva’s best friend and Parker + Rowe Publishing’s most celebrated book editor.

Eva answered with a tortured “Whaaaaat?”

“You’re alive!”

“According to my Fitbit, I’ve been deceased for weeks.”

“You’re in there. I hear Issa Rae through the phone. I’m outside—I’ll let myself in.”

Cece swept through the door seconds later. She was overwhelming in every way—six feet tall, creamy cocoa skin, bleached-blond coils. A product of Spelman, Vineyard summers, and white-gloved cotillions with Talented Tenth

debs, she dressed exclusively in vintage Halston and always appeared to have leapt off a 1978 *Vogue* cover. Or at least to be someone who knew Pat Cleveland.

She did, actually. Cece knew everyone. At forty-five, she’d long been one of

the industry's most notorious editors, but her unofficial title was Social Queen of

Black Literati. She collected authors, nurtured them, and whispered plot advice

over cocktails—and her membership-only book/art/film-world parties were legendary. Eva had quickly discovered all of this after she'd won the short-story

contest and Cece had become her editor.

During their introductory lunch on the Princeton campus, Cece took one look

at the teen's "haunted doe eyes and chaotic coffee-shop-poetess curls" (a description she oft repeated), and her soul screamed, *Project!*

Before Eva knew it, she had a doting big sister. Cece helped her move to Brooklyn, quit her vices, and learn the art of curl maintenance—and introduced

her to a social circle of happening young writers.

Cece was bossy as hell, but she'd earned it. There'd be no Eva without her.

Humming, the glamazon disappeared into the kitchen, emerging seconds later

with a glass of pinot grigio and the ice pack Eva kept in the freezer. Sitting beside her, Cece slipped the frosty pack atop Eva's head with a flourish, as if it

were a crown.

Cece was one of the few people who really knew about Eva's condition, and

she helped out however she could.

“I’m here,” she announced grandly, “to discuss the State of the Black Author

panel.”

“The Brooklyn Museum event you’re moderating tomorrow night? Belinda’s

a panelist, right?” Celebrated poet Belinda Love was their close friend.

“Auntie Cece!” Audre appeared again, wearing her third costume change: a neon unicorn onesie.

“Audre-Bear! I’ve been meaning to text you for stress-management advice.

My kitchen renovation is taking such a toll.”

Audre plopped down on Cece’s lap. “Try chocolate meditation. You stick a Hershey’s Kiss in your mouth and sit quietly, letting it melt. No chewing. It’s about mindfulness.”

“I’ve no doubt, doll, but is there a sugar-free option?”

“Cece, focus,” wailed Eva, smushing the ice pack against her temple. “The panel?”

“Oh. An author dropped out. She got salmonella from a food truck in British

Columbia.”

Audre frowned. “Colombia has a British section?”

Brooklyn schools strike again, thought Eva. No concept of geography, but she’s mastered mindfulness.

“British Columbia’s in Canada, babe,” Eva said.

“Interesting. I could’ve looked it up if I had a phone.” Sulkily, Audre rose and

disappeared back into her room.

“Long story short,” continued Cece, “I offered you as a replacement. You’re

on the panel!” She shimmied her shoulders, pleased with her sorcery.

“Every relevant media outlet is invited. It’ll be livestreamed. This is *the* career boost you need.”

The blood drained from Eva’s face. “Me? No. I can’t...I’m not qualified to pontificate on race in America. You *know* how intense it’ll get. Every Black book event since the election has turned into a woke-off.”

“You named your child after a noted civil rights warrior. Are you not woke?”

“I’m woke *recreationally*. Belinda and the other panelists are woke

professionally. They have NAACP Awards and are on the talk-show circuit!

Who was the panelist with food poisoning?”

Cece paused. “Zadie Smith.”

With a defeated grimace, Eva slid the ice pack over her eyes. “Cece, this is a

New York Times—sponsored panel at the Brooklyn Museum. I’m not a serious author. I’m a last-minute airport purchase.”

Cece’s brow furrowed. “Let’s be absolutely real. You tried for ages to get a

film deal. You’ve finally got a producer, and now quality directors aren’t biting,

because *Cursed* is too genre. Show Hollywood your power! This'll be PR gold.

Well, this plus the 2019 Black Literary Excellence Award you'll win on Sunday."

"You think I'll win?"

"There's a vampire-witch-mermaid threesome scene in *Cursed Fourteen*," noted Cece. "You'll win for the audacity alone."

Eva groaned into a throw pillow. "I'm not up to this."

"You're nervous about sharing a stage with Belinda? The daughter of a *hairstylist*?"

Eva glared at her. "Beyoncé's the daughter of a hairstylist."

"Fine. Go explain to Audre why you're scared to try new things."

She threw up her hands. Of course Cece got her with the Audre stuff. Every time Eva made a move, she considered how it'd look to her daughter.

Eva's parenting wasn't mommy-blog approved. They often had pizza for dinner and fell asleep watching *Succession*, and since childcare was a luxury, Audre attended too many grown-up events. Plus, on bad head days, Eva allowed

Audre unlimited TikTok time after homework so she could crash for a bit.

But Eva let herself off the hook for those things. When it came to mothering,

what mattered to her was setting a powerful example. When Audre audited her

memories, Eva wanted her to remember a ballsy woman who invented her life from scratch. No man, no help, no problem.

The Single-Mom Superhero myth, thought Eva, *and it's a trap*.

Eva dug the heels of her hands into her eye sockets. “What am I gonna wear?”

Cece grinned.

“I already have a Gucci number on hold for you. You’re adorable, but you dress like you host a hip-hop podcast,” she said with a sigh. “It’ll be an adventure! Writers need stimulation. The thrill of your day can’t be memorizing

your positive Amazon reviews.”

“I don’t do that anymore,” Eva grumbled.

“Speaking of stimulation, will you please revisit Tinder? When’s the last time

you met someone you didn’t ghost after three dates?”

“I’m doing them a favor by ghosting,” Eva pointed to her Wonder Woman panties. “Would you wanna fuck this?”

“There’s a fetish for everything,” said Cece generously.

Eva chuckled. “When I feel lonely, I scroll through Tinder and remind myself

what I’m missing. Which is dudes with coconut-oiled beards all posing next to

the same graffitied wall in Dumbo with profiles written entirely in emojis.
And I

remember that I'm not lonely. I'm *alone*. When I'm comatose from writing
and

mothering, when I'm hurting too badly to cook, talk, or smile, I curl up with
'alone' like a security blanket. Alone doesn't care that I don't shave my legs
in

the winter. Alone never gets disappointed by me." Eva sighed. "It's the best
relationship I've ever been in."

"Are you speaking metaphorically," asked Cece, "or are you dating a man
named Alone?"

"You can't be serious."

"My doorman is a SoundCloud rapper named Sincere. One never knows."

"I like being single," Eva continued quietly. "I don't want anyone to have to
really see me."

They sat in silence, Eva idly snapping the rubber band on her wrist.

"I'm scared," she admitted finally.

"Good." Cece kissed her cheek. "I've seen what you come up with when
you're scared."

[Chapter 3](#)

[ROMANTIC COMEDY](#)

2004

“SWEETIE, YOU UP?”

Lizette’s Louisiana drawl was both syrupy and whisper light. No one’s mom

sounded like that.

“You awake? Genevieve? My Evie Sweetie? My Eva Diva? You up?”

Well, Genevieve, a.k.a. Eva Diva, was up now. The covers were pulled up to

her eyebrows, and she was in the fetal position on the ancient, springy twin mattress. Exactly four days ago, when Genevieve Mercier and her mom drove from Cincinnati to Washington, DC, they’d dragged the mattress up the five-story walk-up and flung it on the patchy carpet of the bedroom floor. And there

it had stayed. Genevieve and Lizette were both the same brand of scrawny and

couldn’t afford movers, so after struggling to carry Genevieve’s mattress and her

mom’s mattress, plus a small kitchen table and two folding chairs, up all those

stairs—in the blazing June heat, no less—the nomadic mother-daughter duo had

decided they needed no more decor.

Genevieve opened one eye and scanned the itty-bitty space. She was

seventeen, and this was a new bedroom, but it could’ve been any of the ones she’d occupied in any of the cities she’d lived in at fifteen, twelve, or eleven. It was nondescript, with disposable details, except for one thing that was

unmistakably hers: a plaid suitcase erupting with clothes, pill bottles, and books.

She squinted at the dollar-store alarm clock on the bare windowsill. It was 6:05

a.m. Right on time.

Lizette always came home just as Genevieve was waking up for school. Her mom was a purely nocturnal animal. It was like their personalities were too outsized to exist at the same time—so the mother claimed night, and the daughter got day.

Daytime was for responsible people, and Lizette was a delicate, distracted woman, too wispy to negotiate the details of grown-up living. Like cooking.

Paying taxes. Cleaning. (One time, Genevieve watched her mom vacuum for an

hour before realizing it wasn't plugged in.) Lizette's beauty kept them afloat, which was hard work, Genevieve knew—so she handled everything else. She

forged Lizette's signature at banks. She monitored the pills in Lizette's Valium

bottles. She toasted Lizette's Hot Pockets. She roller-set Lizette's hair before she went out on her "money dates" (*You're for sale—just fucking say it...*).

They'd moved several times since Genevieve was a toddler. Each time was for a different man who promised Lizette a dazzling life. They always set her up

with a place to live, all expenses paid. And it used to be such an adventure.