



WRITE
MY
NAME
ACROSS
THE SKY

a novel

BARBARA O'NEAL

Washington Post bestselling author of
When We Believed in Mermaids

PRAISE FOR BARBARA O'NEAL

The Lost Girls of Devon

One of *Travel + Leisure's* most anticipated books of summer 2020.

“A woman’s strange disappearance brings together four strong women who struggle with their relationships, despite their need for one another. Fans of Sarah Addison Allen will appreciate the emphasis on nature and these women’s unique gifts in this latest by the author of *When We Believed in Mermaids*.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“*The Lost Girls of Devon* draws us into the lives of four generations of women as they come to terms with their relationships and a mysterious tragedy that brings them together. Written in exquisite prose with the added bonus of the small Devon village as a setting, Barbara O’Neal’s book will ensnare readers from the first page, taking us on an emotional journey of love, loss, and betrayal.”

—Rhys Bowen, *New York Times* and #1 Kindle bestselling author of *The Tuscan Child*, *In Farleigh Field*, and the Royal Spyness series

“*The Lost Girls of Devon* is one of those novels that grabs you at the beginning with its imagery and rich language and won’t let you go. Four generations of women deal with the pain and betrayal of the past, and Barbara O’Neal skillfully leads us to understand all their deepest needs and fears. To read a Barbara O’Neal novel is to fall into a different world—a

world of beauty and suspense, of tragedy and redemption. This one, like her others, is spellbinding.”

—Maddie Dawson, bestselling author of *A Happy Catastrophe*

When We Believed in Mermaids

“An emotional story about the relationship between two sisters and the difficulty of facing the truth head-on.”

—*Today*

“There’s a reason Barbara O’Neal is one of the most decorated authors in fiction. With her trademark lyrical style, she’s written a page-turner of the first order. From the very first page, I was drawn into the drama and irresistibly teased along as layers of a family’s complicated past were artfully peeled away. Don’t miss this masterfully told story of sisters and secrets, damage and redemption, hope and healing.”

—Susan Wiggs, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

“More than a mystery, Barbara O’Neal’s *When We Believed in Mermaids* is a story of childhood—and innocence—lost and the long-hidden secrets, lies, and betrayals two sisters must face in order to make themselves whole as adults. Plunge in and enjoy the intriguing depths of this passionate, lustrous novel, and you just might find yourself believing in mermaids.”

—Juliet Blackwell, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Lost Carousel of Provence*, *Letters from Paris*, and *The Paris Key*

“In *When We Believed in Mermaids*, Barbara O’Neal draws us into the story with her crisp prose, well-drawn settings, and compelling characters, in whom we invest our hearts as we experience the full range of human emotion and, ultimately, celebrate their triumph over the past.”

—Grace Greene, author of *The Memory of Butterflies* and the Wildflower House series

“*When We Believed in Mermaids* is a deftly woven tale of two sisters, separated by tragedy and reunited by fate, discovering that the past isn’t always what it seems. By turns shattering and life affirming, as luminous and mesmerizing as the sea by which it unfolds, this is a book club essential—definitely one for the shelf!”

—Kerry Anne King, bestselling author of *Whisper Me This*

The Art of Inheriting Secrets

“Great writing, terrific characters, food elements, romance, a touch of intrigue, and more than a few surprises to keep readers guessing.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Settle in with tea and biscuits for a charming adventure about inheriting an English manor and the means to restore it. Vivid descriptions and characters that read like best friends will stay with you long after this delightful story has ended.”

—Cynthia Ellingsen, bestselling author of *The Lighthouse Keeper*

“*The Art of Inheriting Secrets* is the story of one woman’s journey to uncovering her family’s hidden past. Set against the backdrop of a sprawling English manor, this book is ripe with mystery. It will have you guessing until the end!”

—Nicole Meier, author of *The House of Bradbury* and *The Girl Made of Clay*

“O’Neal’s clever title begins an intriguing journey for readers that unfolds layer by surprising layer. Her respected masterful storytelling blends mystery, art, romance, and mayhem in a quaint English village and breathtaking countryside. Brilliant!”

—Patricia Sands, bestselling author of the Love in Provence series

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PREVIOUS BOOKS BY BARBARA O'NEAL

The Lost Girls of Devon

When We Believed in Mermaids

The Art of Inheriting Secrets

The Lost Recipe for Happiness

The Secret of Everything

How to Bake a Perfect Life

The Garden of Happy Endings

The All You Can Dream Buffet

No Place Like Home

A Piece of Heaven

The Goddesses of Kitchen Avenue

Lady Luck's Map of Vegas

The Scent of Hours

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a novel

BARBARA O'NEAL

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

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

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First edition

For my aunt Lisa, who was a belly dancer, and traveled the world, and speaks five languages, and brought matzo to my grandmother's Easter dinner to share Passover ideas with her nieces and nephews, and breathed possibility into my heart from day one.

I would not be who I am without you, Auntie.

Much love and thanks.

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Chapter One

I am setting up a photo shoot when I hear the news that Isaak has been arrested. For a long moment, it doesn't sink in. My body reacts ahead of my mind, warning me with a long ripple over my spine as I tweak the red shoes sitting beneath a lady's slipper orchid in the soft green environment of the conservatory.

Then his name penetrates my brain. *Isaak Margolis*. I lift my head and look at the radio, as if it will show me his long-lost face. My heart pauses, as if bracing to be shattered all over again, then starts up again with a hard thud.

Isaak.

All these years I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop. Now it falls like a meteor into my world, when I have finally relaxed into this rich, ordinary life filled with music and my Instagram photos and monthly luncheons at the Russian Tea Room with the dwindling numbers of former flight attendants I've known for more than fifty years.

I sink into a chair nearby the table, my legs too shaky to support me, and listen to the BBC announcer explain that the suspected art thief and forger was picked up by Interpol in Florence at the end of a decades-long search for missing works of art. The art world is electrified because he was found with a Pissarro that's been missing since before World War II.

All this time. All this time. For long moments, I allow panic and regret and longing to roar through my veins, emotion surging through me in ways I'd forgotten. I think of Isaak's hard, long face and lovely hands, think of our shared history—our mothers, who suffered both mundane and unimaginable tortures during the war; our desire to shake off that history

and live unencumbered. I think of desire, the air crackling blue when we came within a few feet of each other.

I think of the very real possibility that I will spend the declining number of my days in prison.

I think of his body. His rough voice. The connection that bound us from the very first moments we met. So long ago, and yet, in a way, as recent as last night. Memory is strange that way.

I stand, take a calming breath.

And I wonder, How long do I have?

Chapter Two

As I ride the train to Gloria's on a rainy February evening, I am shivering in my flowered dress and thin jacket, clothes that worked in LA but are no good in this weather. My neck is cold even beneath my hair, and I'm going to have to get a scarf. Not something in floaty silk but a real scarf, knitted and thick. I'm a little embarrassed to be so naively underdressed.

Not that I had much of a choice. I'm carrying everything I own.

My aunt Gloria called yesterday to ask me to house-sit while she jets away to the second home of one of her old TWA buddies. I've done it fairly often the past few years, watching over the apartment and her cats, but the job is really about the greenhouse on the roof and the hundreds of plants she's nurtured for more than two decades.

It would be impossible to say how much of a relief her call was. My last gig finished with a whimper, and I've been couch surfing much too long, thanks to my asshole ex, who locked me out of his Malibu house after a big fight. When my album failed, he had no more use for me, which I should have expected, but it stung. Now, I'm down to \$549 in cash after buying my dinner at LAX last night and hiding in the back of a Panda Express to eat it, and to say I have my tail between my legs would be a major understatement. "Midnight Train to Georgia" has been running on a loop in my mind, Gladys Knight singing her mournful song about giving up. LA proved too much for me too.

Am I giving up? The thought gives me a pain beneath my ribs, but to be honest, I'm thirty-five. How much longer can I possibly live the life of an itinerant musician? By now, I thought I'd be rocketing across the

heavens like my mother did. I really believed it, and that's as embarrassing as the failure itself.

Not a failure, says the eternal cheerleader in my head. *Just a setback*.

Whatever. It's getting harder and harder to believe her. The evidence is pretty overwhelming in the opposite direction.

The train stops, and I feel a rush of relief at the familiar sight of the subway tiles looking faintly green in the fluorescent light. People get off. People get on. A blonde teenager with a startling anime tattoo across her neck; a woman in a blue hijab holding the hand of an impish toddler; a remarkably tall, bald white man wearing a bowler hat; a pair of weary-looking middle-aged Latinas with shopping bags on their laps.

It feels right. Welcoming. Nothing could say *home* more than this mix of peoples. LA is a wild blend, too, but everybody is so spread out you're working with a patchwork quilt more than a stew. Relief runs up my spine, and I relax my hold a bit on the Johnny Was bag on my lap, a tote I bought when the album first came out, a celebration of success.

The embroidered bag is now packed to the brim with my earthly goods. I am wearing the handmade cowboy boots that once belonged to my mother and have now become my trademark. I wish I had some leggings, but I forgot how cold the February rain would be. The mark of an outlander, a tourist. I am neither.

At the subway station at 72nd and Broadway, I get off and climb the stairs to greet the pouring rain. That, too, feels like home. Sometimes the sunshine in California can start to feel oppressive. Huddling in my cloth coat, rain dripping down the back of my dress, I hold my violin case close to my chest and hurry home to what is, in summer, one of the prettiest streets in the neighborhood. By the time I reach the six-story prewar building, I'm soaked clear through.

Jorge, the burly, aging doorman, greets me with a joyful cry. "Willow! Where's your winter coat? Why don't you have an umbrella?"

I'm shivering and exhausted. "I know." I squeeze his arm. "We'll talk, but I'm wiped out."

"Sure, sure. She's up there, waiting for you."

I nod wearily. My boot heels clomp over the marble entryway, and I punch the button for the old elevator. It's been upgraded, but it's still slow and tiny. It carries me to the top floor, number six. The hallway smells of

dinner—meat and aromatics and even a note of baking bread—from the other apartment. My stomach growls. I hope she’s shopped.

Jorge must have rung her, because before I reach the door, it’s flung open and my aunt opens her arms. She’s wearing turquoise, of course, because that’s her signature color. Today it’s a silk caftan printed with peacock feathers, belted tightly to show off her tiny waist. “Willow,” she says. “You’re soaked! Where is your umbrella?”

“I forgot I might need it,” I say wearily. In fact, I can’t remember when I last owned an umbrella.

“Come in, come in,” she says kindly. “Go get in the shower right now.”

Beneath the shards of light falling in patches to the worn, once-fabulous parquet floor, I drop my bag and violin and wiggle out of my boots. I turn them upside down to drain on a thick braided rug Gloria keeps for this purpose. Water drips from the ends of my hair. “Will you make some tea?” I ask.

“Absolutely.” She has produced a thick towel, a vivid pink, because she sees no point to having anything that isn’t filled with life in some way. I wipe my face, and one of the cats comes tripping joyfully in to greet me. She’s a pretty black and white with long hair and yellow eyes. “Hello, Eloise!” I say, reaching down to stroke her tail. She trills.

“Sam said she’ll be around tomorrow,” Gloria says. “She had a soiree tonight for the release of a new app.”

Sam is my older sister, a dazzlingly successful game designer who finds me unbearably ridiculous. She’ll only show up out of duty and probably won’t be particularly cheery, but I’ve never really overcome my hero worship, and a part of me will be glad to see her anyway. “She said ‘soiree,’ did she?” I ask dryly.

“No, of course not.” She waves toward my bedroom. “Let’s get you in a hot shower. Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

She grins. “There’s my girl. What do you want?”

“A Reuben from Bloom’s.”

“I’ll call it in right away.” She pats my shoulder, then picks up my bag. “Good God. What’ve you got in here?”

Everything, I want to say. “Not everyone can pack a year’s worth of clothing into a handbag,” I say, referring to one of her many talents. As she

was a TWA stewardess in the swinging seventies, she is an astonishingly good packer. Shouldering my violin, I follow her out of the foyer into the hallway that runs the length of the building, east to west, and all the way to the end, where she opens the door to my corner bedroom. Windows to the west and south show dusk falling, lights springing up yellow and blue and red all the way to the horizon. Within is my four-poster bed, hung with mosquito netting when I was a teen, and a painting of the Faerie Queene in blues and greens that takes up a lot of space on one wall. Photos of me at various competitions hang next to a copy of my album cover, which is next to the most famous of my mother's.

Home.

It's a word as fraught as any I know, but this spot is one of my favorites in the world. Here, I can let the space ground me, hold me, give me some time to figure out what's next in my mess of a life.



The Reuben is the most glorious thing I've sunk my teeth into for months. Everybody in the world thinks they know how to make a good one, but you just don't know if you haven't had the real thing, with real pastrami from a deli where they've made it authentically for generations and then layered it with fresh, crisp sauerkraut and swiss cheese, all of it grilled on true rye bread. I've never cared for the dressing, which Gloria remembered.

"This is *stunningly* delicious," I manage after a few bites. I set the sandwich back into its wax paper wrap and wipe my fingers, feeling the sense of home and comfort expand, deepen, spread through my body.

"I wish I had your metabolism," she says for probably the millionth time, and that, too, is comforting. "Your mother was the same. She could eat anything."

"Luck of the draw," I say and push the potato chips her way. She adores them but will only eat two. "You look fit and happy."

She turns her head away from the small television, where a twenty-four-hour news channel plays on a shelf of the poorly lit kitchen. This is a new habit. "Sorry, I wasn't paying attention," she says and turns it off with a remote.

"Did something happen today?"

“Not really.” She swings her foot beneath the caftan. Her toenails are a candy-apple red. “It’s just noise.”

I nod. I wonder if she’s been lonely, but that’s not really in character. All my life, she’s been very sure of herself and her needs and perfectly able to meet them. I offer her another chip, and she takes it distractedly. “Where are you going this time?” I ask.

“Sorry?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Your trip? Isn’t that why I’m here?”

“Oh. Yes. Dani is going to the islands and invited me to come stay at her guesthouse.”

“That sounds good. February in the tropics.”

“Yes.” Her gaze drifts back toward the television, and I notice she hasn’t put down the remote.

“Is everything okay, Auntie?” I ask.

“Of course!” Again, she seems to refocus, pouring fresh tea into my cup from one of the pots she’s collected in her travels around the world. This one is green enamel with white leaves, and I know she chose it for the green tea on purpose. “I’ve missed you, sweetheart. Tell me about everything.”

But I can tell she’s still not really with me. Something is definitely off.

Chapter Three

The release party for *Ganymede's Ghosts* is held at Hops and Heads in Brooklyn, a leathery place masquerading as a hip brewpub so that all the aging boy wonders can reassure themselves they're still cool. I'm only there because Tommy Gains, the designer, is one of my oldest friends in the business and he personally called to invite me.

I hate these gigs, but I polished myself up and wore a belted yellow tank dress that does wonders for my boxy body, and some heels that make me stand a full head above most of the guys. Ever since I was thirteen, people have asked if I was a model. Not because I'm beautiful, because I'm not; it's just the only thing they can imagine a woman of five feet eleven would do, especially if she has "strong" features like I do, a bold nose and heavy eyebrows and a super-wide mouth that gives me a ridiculous number of teeth when I smile, like Jerry Hall to the twelfth power. I make it a practice not to smile and paid an optometrist to fit me with several pairs of geek-girl glasses, horn rimmed and round wires and some very cute pairs of colored acrylic. Just donning a pair of glasses awards a woman an extra fifty points of intellect. As a woman in the competitive field of computer games and game apps, I need all the help I can get.

The noise is frenetic, with an electronic beat thrumming through the room, not too loud, not too soft. My goal is to find Tommy, give him a punch in the arm, and get out. I don't want to see the pity in the eyes of those who know what's going on with my company, and I also don't want to fake it with those who don't.

I'll be forced to do both, of course. The faster I go, the less I'll suffer.

One of the things that surprises me as I make my way through the crowd at the pub is just how many women there are in the room. Since Gamergate in 2014, major companies have overtly recruited women and invited them into the circle, which has led to more females in college programs and showing up on the staffs. A few of them notice me, give me a chin lift.

One earnest girl with rainbow tips in her long hair swings around, and her mouth drops open. “Oh my God! Sam Janssen! You’re the whole reason I’m in this field. I absolutely loved *Boudicca* when I was a little girl.”

When I was a little girl. “Thanks. What’s your name?”

“Ashley Madrid.”

“Nice to meet you.” I shake her hand and start to move past her, but she’s got some grit and moves her body a little to keep me there, sliding a card out from somewhere, one that she presses into my palm.

“Look, I know I’m nobody, but I would seriously love to talk to you. Just coffee?”

“I’m kind of—”

“I would intern with you for free, for whatever. I would bring your tea or run errands or whatever you wanted, just for a chance to see how you work.”

It’s hard to resist a pitch like that, with her big brown eyes full of hope and the surety that Big Things Await. “Maybe,” I say and tuck the card in my pocket. “I’ll think about it.”

She gives me a namaste bow. “Thank you. Have a good night. I saw Asher over by the snack table, if you’re looking for him.”

Asher.

A jolt burns through me, happiness and sadness all mixed up together. Asher is my oldest friend, my erstwhile business partner, and one of the people I love most in the world. Once upon a time we would have shown up here together, amusing each other with snide remarks. “Thanks.”

What I should do is steer clear, but some ancient part of me makes a beeline for the snack table.

Before I reach it, I run smack into Jared Maloney, a big hale guy with very little hair left on his head and a bushy blond beard to make up for it. His jeans are up to the minute and the paisley button-down is painfully hip, but no matter how much money he makes, it’ll never hide the miserable

adolescence he suffered. His voice is always just slightly too loud, and he doesn't respect personal space.

"Samantha!" he says, using the full form of my name even though no one in our world does. I know he does it to remind me that I'm female. "Just the lady I wanted to see."

Lady. "How are you, Jared?" I say without inflection.

"Very well, thank you."

"Good, good." I look over his shoulder to see if I can spy Asher. Surely he'd rescue me if he saw me standing here with Jared, who has one main theme, which starts in . . . three, two, one:

"I just scored a prize bit of Billie Thorne memorabilia—a poster from her first show at CBGB."

My attention snaps around. "CBGB?"

"She played there." He sips his beer delicately. "You didn't know?"

"I have to admit I didn't." There's no rescue in sight. Sometimes, just giving in to his desire to rave about his favorite rock star, my mother, is enough to buy some goodwill. And for all his wretchedness, he is a very powerful guy in my world, known for aggressive takeovers and splashy buyouts. I have no doubt I'm on his list of upcoming acquisitions. "That sounds like quite a prize."

"Yes," he says. He tells me the songs she played for the gig, the people in her band at the time. It was early on, for sure, before she made the album that sent her star skyward, *Midnight Morning*. "I found a photo," he says and scrolls through his phone, one finger in the air to pin me in place. "Here it is." He swings the phone around.

It's my mother at age twenty, skinny and still blonde, her hair in ribbons over her shoulders, her nipples poking out of a T-shirt, seven necklaces ringing her neck, her arms full of bracelets. A cigarette is burning in her right hand. She's punky and hippie and beautiful—and I've never seen before how much my sister Willow looks like her. A year or two after this shot, she chopped off her hair and dyed it black, turning herself into Billie Thorne instead of Billie Janssen.

"Great, isn't it?" Jared says and looks at it again.

I feel pierced, seeing her so young. Untouched. For a while when I was very small, she grew out the black pixie. A memory slips through my mind, me brushing her hair over her shoulders as she sits on the floor. An entirely too familiar sense of loss breaches my walls, and I have to take in a

deep breath to make it recede, staring off into the crowd so that he can't read anything.

I give a nod. "Yeah."

"You're lucky you knew her," he says, and I know he means it most earnestly. "She was one of the best singer-songwriters to ever live."

"She was definitely something." A junkie, a lost soul, never really a mother at all.

He drops the phone in his pocket and looks at me. I'm instantly on alert, his body language transmitting something my body picks up on but my mind is slow to recognize. "Sam."

I raise my brows. "Jared."

"I'm hearing rumors."

Fuck. Here it is. "About?"

"Boudicca's in trouble."

I turn at the mention of my company, ready to flee, now urgently searching for a face I know. "I'm not talking about this."

He touches my arm. Just touches it, right above the elbow. "I want to help."

I plant my feet, fury rising through my spine, stiffening it. "Help? Don't you mean take over?"

"No, no, no! It's not like that." He spreads his hand over his chest. "I swear on Billie Thorne that I would never do that."

Weirdly, I believe him. Or maybe I'm just desperate enough to entertain any kind of possibility. "What, then?"

"I would like to sit down and talk with you about the company. I have some ideas."

He is probably going to offer to buy Boudicca, where it will be absorbed into the massive brand that is Arrakis, his game company. Even the thought of it creates stars of fury behind my eyes. And yet Boudicca *is* in trouble. I wait.

"Dinner, tomorrow?"

Something has to be done, and I don't have to say yes to anything he says. "Sure." Instantly, my temple starts to ache.

"I'll have my assistant send the deets."

Then I'm standing there in the crowd where I don't know enough of the players anymore, feeling 150 years old, a has-been at 40. I realize this is probably how my mother felt when she went on the road that last time, after

a flopped album and a half dozen stints in rehab for a heroin habit that started probably right around the time that CBGB photo was taken.

Just give me one more chance. It's not a prayer because I don't believe in God, but maybe something is listening anyway.

I make my way to the bar. I miss beer deeply but haven't been able to drink it in ages, and at the best of times, I'm not a big drinker. I've just never seen the point. But right now, I need something to take the edge off this headache. "A vodka soda with lime, please."

The bartender, with muscles popping from below his shirtsleeves, says, "A woman who knows what she wants." He pours the drink and passes it over with a wink. "Good health." His accent is Irish. He's really quite hot, and how long has it been since—

Nope. He can't be thirty, and I haven't yet started seducing boys. "Thanks." I raise the glass and face the room, promising myself I only have to make the rounds once, find Tommy, and get the hell out. I take a sip and stand there, searching the room for my points of entry.

"Didn't expect to see you here," says a familiar voice in my ear.

"Asher!"

He smiles his big, happy, welcoming smile. His glasses are not fake prescriptions but correct a very serious nearsightedness, which he has always claimed is the mark of a brilliant mind. His hair is wild as ever, loose black curls he never bothers to tame with product, and below it is the most welcome face on the planet.

Before he can put up his guard, I dive in for a hug, and before he can remember not to, he hugs me back. He smells of fresh air and Safeguard soap and a note of cinnamon that marks him completely. "It's so good to see you," I say, inhaling. Feeling.

He doesn't immediately let go, which I take as a hopeful sign. His arms are tight, and I can feel the density of his torso. "Ditto." He disentangles himself. "I thought you and Tommy fell out a couple of years ago."

"We did." He posted a thoughtlessly sexist comment about female gamers on social media, and I sliced him into little tiny pieces. "And then we worked it out." I give him a level look, trying to use telepathy to say that's what I want to happen with us. I punch his arm lightly, and even as I do it, I think it's stupid. "How are you?"

"Good. You?"

“Great.”

Then we stand there awash in an ocean of things. Things we can't talk about. Our long friendship, our ill-fated night, our broken relationship. “How's your mom?” I ask.

“She had the flu that's been going around, but she's fine now. You should go see her. She misses you.”

“It's just been busy.” A lie, but I missed the way things had been so much the last time I visited Deborah that I just can't do it. It underlined all the echoey emptiness that is my life these days. “I'll make it happen soon.”

“How's Gloria?”

I give him a half smile. “She's Gloria. Her Instagram account has two hundred fifty thousand followers now. She's a bona fide influencer.”

He laughs, showing his big white teeth. “That's great. Give her my love.”

“You should do it yourself. You know you love her. Willow's home too.”

“To stay?”

“Doubtful. You know Willow.”

He nods. “She's a free spirit.”

He swivels to pick up his beer from the bar. We squeeze down to let a trio of twentysomethings belly up to order drinks. “I feel about ninety-seven years old in this room,” he says.

“Right? When did we become the older generation?” I shake my head. “A girl who played *Boudicca* when she was a ‘little girl’ offered to be an intern.”

“Ow. But also, that's a good thing, right?”

“I took her card. What are you working on now?”

“New game,” he says and mimes zipping his lips. “It's at that embryonic stage.”

“I get it.”

“You?”

“A couple of things,” I lie. My business is in trouble entirely because I've had a dearth of ideas since Asher left the company. “Still on the AI app. Just can't quite get it right.”

“Anything you want to talk out?”

I look up. His familiar brown eyes meet mine. In them, I see patience and kindness, qualities I have undervalued my entire life. “She still feels

like an annoying, needy girlfriend. The opposite of what I'm going for."

He chuckles. "That's a time thing, right? Training."

"Yeah, probably." I sip my drink and think of a million ways to express how awful life is without him. I choose the simplest sentence. "I miss you, Asher."

"Me too, Sam."

"Can't we just have lunch or even just coffee sometimes? Go to a movie?" We often spent Saturday nights watching anime, a habit we'd started way back in grade school, long before anime was hip. I aim for a lighter note. "It's kind of hard to talk adults into picking up the anime habit."

He bows his head. "No. I'm not there yet."

I swallow. Give myself a minute so I won't sound as intensely emotional as I feel. "This is crazy. We've been best friends for thirty years. How am I supposed to just go get another one?"

"I don't know." His mouth twists with regret. "I'm lonely too."

"Then why—"

His jaw sets. "No. Sorry."

"Kay." If I don't get out of here, I'm going to make a big scene, and that's not going to do me or my business any good. "I have to go."

He catches my arm. "I'm sorry, Sam. I wish I could."

"Me too."

I walk away.

Chapter Four

I've been online since dawn, trying to figure out exactly what's happening with Isaak, googling and following links down rabbit hole after rabbit hole. It's still not clear what he's charged with, exactly, or where he will be tried. It pains me to think of him in a cell, wearing rough cotton, eating horrible food. He has always been so careful with his clothes, so particular about his food.

I'm standing over the sink peeling a boiled egg and drinking black coffee when a news story pops up on the small television planted on a shelf in the corner. Willow is still asleep—poor girl looked even more waifish than usual last night—and I plan to let her sleep as long as she likes. I've had a few suspicions about that manipulative boyfriend of hers, and by the haunted look in her eyes, I'm not wrong.

The announcer says, "France has announced that they will extradite Isaak Margolis for trial. The suspected art thief is connected to dozens of paintings that were lost during World War Two, which Margolis is suspected of selling during a flurry of activity in the late seventies and early eighties. Interpol is still seeking several accomplices. It is not known if the paintings were actually the lost masterpieces Margolis claimed or forged reproductions."

My heart whirls into a staccato rhythm, and I wonder if I'll have a heart attack and be spared all the decisions I need to make. I press the heel of my hand into my breastbone.

"Two masterworks in particular are thought to be among the lost paintings, a Renoir and an early-medieval masterpiece stolen from a hidden cache of Nazi holdings in 1947. In other news—"

I click it off. Stand here trying to think through the noise in my brain. Will he be prosecuted? Will they trace things back to me?

Carefully, I brush my fingers clean and walk through a swinging door into a small butler's pantry that smells of dust. At the other end is another door, nearly always propped open, into the formal dining room where none of us ever eat.

It's a very formal room, with wood-paneled walls and parquet floors covered in properly faded arabian rugs. An enormous table, left by the former owners, is carved of dark wood and surrounded by twelve matching chairs. It dominates the center beneath a rather plain chandelier. I moved the ornate crystal beauty that used to hang here into my bedroom, where it would be enjoyed rather than hidden away.

On the walls, all the walls, are dozens of paintings, which Billie collected on her travels with a casual fanaticism that always surprised me. Few of them are better than average, but she made a couple of brilliant purchases over the years—an early Lee Krasner, a surrealist drawing that turned out to be an Escher, a remarkable sketch by David Hockney that's probably worth a small fortune. She had wide-ranging tastes in art, just as she had wide-ranging tastes in everything. Music, sex, food, drugs. Most drugs she could manage, but heroin brought her down, just as alcohol brought down our mother.

I wander into the parlor, also filled with art. Hanging in plain sight among all the others, the abstracts and landscapes and sketches, is a small square painting in need of cleaning, but I daren't take it in to have it done. Even beneath all the grime of decades of New York City soot, it's a bright landscape, wheat and trees and a row of poppies very much in the style of Renoir.

Because it is.

An actual Renoir.

I cannot sell it, of course. No one has ever noticed it on the wall among all the other paintings and imitations, and I hope it will remain this way.

But there is much to connect me to Isaak. Will Interpol come after me too? Our love affair was quite well known in our group, and Interpol will certainly pay attention to the fact that I was a flight attendant, flying internationally for nearly two decades, so could easily have carried contraband.