

CHAPTER 1

It began, predictably, with a dream.

Josie was walking down the busy hall in her old high school, and everyone was shouting, “Hi, Josie! Hey, Josie!” just the way they used to. After all, she had been a big deal.

I’m such a cliché, she thought. *Dreaming about high school. Just like people always do.*

“Hi, Josie!”

Josie waved and wondered why, despite the glorious and sincere adoration of her classmates, she felt only dread.

Wait, was this going to be an anxiety dream? She looked down to see if she was naked, but nope: fully clothed. She entered a classroom, expecting to have to take a test she hadn’t studied for—but the teacher just greeted her with a smile.

The teacher did look like a purple, toothy octopus, but it was, after all, a dream. And judging by the fear knotting up in her gut, it was going to be a bad one.

“Something is about to happen,” she said to herself. “It’s going to be a big deal. And I won’t be prepared for it.”

She sat at a desk, facing the closed classroom door, and waited for whatever would come in.

“I’m already here,” said Justin, sitting to her left.

“Oh good,” said Josie. She reached out, and he took her hand.

“Me too,” said Nina, squeezing her other hand.

Josie smiled at Nina. What could possibly go wrong as long as she had her safety net, Justin and Nina?

“I’m here too!” said the octopus, wagging furry octopus eyebrows and waving gorgeous purple tentacles.

Josie gave the octopus a big thumbs-up. She didn’t want to offend and risk a bad grade. What class was this anyway? She meant to turn to ask Justin, but her focus kept pulling to the door. A bright light, as if from a single bulb, was shining behind the frosted glass window. The light got brighter, piercing through the edges of the door. And then, a shadow. A figure. Somebody.

Something. About to happen. Energy pulsed behind that thought, pushing forward, the way a speeding car gets louder as it zooms near—building, screeching, screaming . . .

And, predictably, Josie woke up.

A second or two creaked by before she remembered she was not home in Arizona. She also wasn’t on her old futon bed in Queens. She was, randomly, in Montana, sleeping in a foldout couch in the spare room.

Josie groaned and rolled over, the springs grinding beneath her, and she bumped into something both hard and furry. A robotic voice said, “*I want to be your pal.*”

Josie sat upright, her heart sputtering. She tore back the covers.

The hard, furry thing was just Mia’s talking bear toy. Its mouth moved up and down with a labored creaking.

“*Read me a story.*”

Mia sometimes had nightmares. Since her mom was out of town, she’d probably crept into Josie’s room for a post-nightmare restorative snuggle and then left the bear behind.

Josie fumbled for her cell phone from the side table. It was 7:32 a.m. She hesitated to bother Justin when he was probably getting ready for school but then went ahead and texted a photo of the bear.

JOSIE

I don’t remember going to bed with this guy last night but I woke up to him this morning

She stared at the phone. Its blank screen just stared back at her all blankly, so she checked her email while she was waiting for Justin to respond.

FROM: York Bank Account Services

TO: Josie Sergakis

SUBJECT: account past due

No, no, no . . . Josie’s stomach folded in on itself in a way that made her glad she hadn’t eaten yet. If she missed a payment, the bank might notify her mother, who’d cosigned on her credit card. And then her mother would know—*no, no, no . . .*

The bulk of Josie’s nanny salary went directly to her credit-card balance. April’s payment should have gone out a couple of weeks ago. Maybe there was a bank error.

She tried to log in on the bank’s mobile site, but it insisted on a password her phone no longer remembered, so she dialed the bank’s number.

“All of our customer-service agents are taking other calls. You are TWENTY-FIRST in line.”

Josie set the phone to speaker and got dressed to the hold music—a synthesized cover of “Welcome to New York.” The T-shirt and sweats she’d slept in were practically clothing, so she brushed her teeth. Washed her face. Pulled her hair into a ponytail. Called it good.

The clock read 7:43 a.m. Mia was always up by now.

Josie carefully opened her bedroom door into the family room of the condo.

“Mia?” she whispered.

Except for the tinny music squeaking out of her phone, the condo was a monolith of silence. And brownness. Brown granite kitchen countertop. Brown sofa. Brown carpet. If a deer broke in and held really still, Josie wasn’t sure she’d notice.

She hesitated outside Mia's door. Josie didn't want to wake her, but she'd been Mia's nanny for months and had never known the girl to sleep in. Josie carefully turned the knob to avoid a clicking sound and eased the door open.

The bed was empty. Her heart started to pound.

"Mia?" She ran into Mia's mom's bedroom. And there, curled up in the center of the king-sized bed, was the five-year-old, her curly black hair over her face.

The girl roused. "Mommy?" she said.

"No, it's Josie. Your mom is still in Nairobi. She'll be back tomorrow."

"Okay," said Mia. And that word sounded so brave, it broke Josie's broken heart a little more.

"I'm here. I'm not leaving you, I promise," said Josie.

"Okay," said Mia, and both the tightness in her voice and her grip on Josie's arm lifted.

"Did you have bad dreams?"

Mia nodded. "Are you listening to music?"

"Um . . . yeah." Josie held up her phone. "Do you like it?"

"No," said Mia.

"Yeah, me neither."

They ate cold cereal at the kitchen counter. The four-chair square table was covered in a week's worth of crayons and paper, clay creations, used-up watercolors, and dried-up snacks. Josie reminded herself that she'd better clean up before Victoria returned and keep up the

facade that she was a responsible girl—woman?—who had her act together.

Josie had been Mia's nanny in New York City, coming into the little girl's life just in time to have a front-row seat to the dissolution of her parents' marriage. She barely knew Mia's dad, a *my-work-is-sooo-important* lawyer at some Manhattan firm. When the divorce was final, Mia's mom, Victoria, suddenly decided to move with Mia to their summer condo in Missoula, Montana.

"Montana! A clean start!" Victoria had said. "I'll raise Mia in the fresh air!" Victoria begged Josie to come with them. Mia was already attached to her, and Victoria would need a live-in nanny now. She was having to take back up her international business work, with all its travel.

Josie had figured, *Sure, why not move to Montana, where I know nobody and have zero prospects or any future whatsoever? In this life, you either make it or you don't.* And Josie hadn't made it. Montana seemed like as good a place as any to waste some time.

"Nope, nope, nope," Mia said, spooning gobs of sugary cereal from one bowl to the other.

Mia had two cereal bowls—yellow for eating and red for overflow. Sometimes she had too much cereal. Too Much Cereal had to go to time-out in the red bowl until Mia was prepared to acknowledge it.

Josie was tidying to the beat of a synthesized "Smells Like Teen Spirit" when her phone buzzed. A text!

JUSTIN

ha!

Ha? That was it? Well, her text hadn't been jaw-droppingly witty or anything, but maybe it deserved more than a *ha?* She was trying to come up with something clever to text back when a voice droned on the speaker: "All of our customer-service agents are taking other calls. You are TWENTIETH in line."

"Nooooo," said Josie.

She tried to strangle her cell but accidentally hung up instead. What if the bank had already contacted Mom? What if Mom knew that at age eighteen, her daughter was already buried under an obscene amount of useless debt? What if the bank forced Mom to get a second mortgage?

"Uggghh," said Josie.

"You're noisy today," said Mia.

Josie raised an eyebrow. She really didn't need a five-year-old adding color commentary. Mia stared back in that creepy, dead-eyed way she had.

In robotic teddy voice, Josie said, "*Take me with you.*"

"*I want to be your pal,*" Mia quoted back in monotone. Her imitation of the toy bear was uncanny. Josie laughed.

"*Play with me, Mia, or I will eat your brains.*"

Mia squealed and hopped off her stool, running

away. But slowly. Stopping to look back, to make sure Josie was still chasing.

Josie dutifully shamle-chased Mia around and around the coffee table. Mia giggled, half terrified, half excited, and then finally allowed Josie to grab her.

Mia wrapped her arms around Josie and squeezed.

“Aw,” said Josie, surprised how sweet it felt to receive this little girl’s hug. She hadn’t realized that her chest had been feeling a little emptied out, her heart kind of shrunken and rattling around loose in there, till Mia’s affection helped to fill it back up. Josie squeezed her back, wanting in turn to relieve any sadness Mia must be feeling with her mom away.

The hug lasted about 1.5 seconds, till Mia had had more than enough affection, thank you, and wriggled away.

Josie’s phone buzzed.

NINA

Sorry I didn’t call back last night. Busy now.
Finance class, church choir, then work. Later?

JOSIE

Yes please

Nothing to report anyway. Josie’s routine was identical day after day, while her best friend was at the University of Chicago, attending fascinating lectures and dating interesting people. And apparently working somewhere?

Josie hadn't known she'd gotten a job or what the deal was with church choir. As far as Josie knew, Nina didn't attend any church. Well, she'd get the details later and would just have to hold on emotionally till Nina's voice could sustain her.

"What are we doing today?" Mia asked, putting her cereal bowls in the sink.

"Something fun," said Josie.

Mia gasped. "School?" She clasped her hands, her eyes glistening, as if she'd stolen the expression from an old movie about a pure-hearted orphan.

"Uh . . . no, not today." Victoria had signed Mia up for preschool three mornings a week, but for friend-hungry Mia, it wasn't nearly enough. "I thought we could check out that park by the river!"

Josie hoped that Mia would be entertained on a playground long enough for Josie to get to caller number one and fix this before her financial house of cards toppled.

Judging by Mia's dead-eyed expression, *park* did not even approach the grandeur of *school*. In her robotic teddy voice, she said, "*Mia is bored. Mia wants friends.*"

"Yes. Friends. There will be friends at the park. Even better friends than you play with in preschool." Josie slipped into a posh New England accent. "Dah-ling, you shall make the most mah-velous friends."

"More," said Mia.

So Josie chattered in a Russian accent, in an American Southern accent, and in her grandmother's Greek accent

as they slipped on shoes. They automatically went for their coats before Josie remembered, once again, with rapturous joy, that it was May. Boldly, she stepped out the front door with nothing more than a zip-up hoodie.

A hoodie in May. The Arizona girl inside Josie shook her head in disbelief.

They crossed the street and headed toward Missoula's cozy downtown. Josie's familiarity with Missoula was mostly limited to the stretch between the condo and the grocery store. Josie didn't have a driver's license, so when Victoria was out of town, she had to do all errands on foot. And why do any excessive errands in tiny, two-horse Missoula when she could curl up in bed instead and obsessively read Broadway news and scan through old text-message chains?

But May . . . Josie reluctantly had to admit that May in Montana wasn't half bad. Air so clean you could drink it like water. That famously big sky arching its back, stretching wide and strong. Everywhere, life was just about to happen.

Their pace was slow enough to allow Mia her frequent need to hop over cracks, and Josie found herself singing not unhappily as they passed a Methodist church, a bar, a vegan restaurant, a yoga studio, another bar, an art gallery, a bar . . .

A small storefront scrunched between two buildings advertised:

COFFEE

YOUR ENTIRELY PUN-FREE SOURCE OF HOT BEVERAGES

The man out front setting up sidewalk tables was wearing all denim: shirt, jacket, and pants tucked into cowboy boots. He had golden brown skin and a head so bald it was shiny.

“Good morning, songbird!” he said.

Josie startled, briefly forgetting that outside New York City, strangers spoke to each other. There was so much room in Montana, people didn’t have to pretend to be alone in public. Here, privacy leaked from the rocks and fertilized the wildflowers and sang like wind chimes in the breeze: *All the privacy you want! And all you don’t want! Isolation for free, free, free!*

“You have a lovely singing voice,” he said.

“Oh, thanks.” Embarrassed, she looked down from his face. The name tag pinned to his collar said BRUCE. “I’m not a professional or anything, though I was going to be, and actually I was kind of a big deal in high school . . .”

Had she really just said that? Josie swallowed.

“Uh . . .” She pointed at the sign, desperate to change the subject. “No puns, huh?”

“We take our coffee seriously.”

“So you named your shop Coffee when you could’ve named it something like, uh . . . Brewed Awakening.”

“Brew-Ha-Ha,” he offered.

“Thanks a Latte,” she said, trying to remember past coffee shops. “Espresso Yourself.”

“Java the Hut. They are pretty funny . . .” He gave her a mirthless expression. “For five minutes. I plan to stay in business longer than that.”

Josie offered a polite laugh.

“So, can I get you anything?” Bruce asked.

“Um . . .” After her awkward lingering, she knew she should get something, but money talk made Josie sweaty. After dropping out of high school, she’d survived in New York City by paying all her expenses with her now-shredded credit card. If she kept putting almost all of her nanny salary toward the balance, she could pay it off in a little over a year. But Mia would start kindergarten this fall. Surely Victoria wouldn’t keep Josie on full-time if Mia was in school half the day. Josie was just treading water.

She glanced at the laminated menu affixed to the front door. Civility demanded she purchase something after all the lingering.

“A . . . small tea.”

“Lemon? Cream? Sugar?” he asked.

“Do they cost extra?”

He came back with a recyclable to-go cup of hot water and a peppermint tea bag, a packet of sugar balanced atop. “It’s on the house.”

“Thank you, Bruce!”

He winked. Not in a creepy way. But like he knew. Like he'd also once run away from his supposedly bright prospects and into an unknown place to play hide-and-seek with himself too. Or something.

"Look, a bookstore," said Mia, tugging Josie toward the shop next door. The front window display held books on wires as if they were birds in flight. "It's bad luck to see a bookstore and not go in."

Mia had a long list of bad-luck things, and when they were unavoidable, she had to do a great deal of hopping to protect herself and Josie from the bad luck.

"I've never heard that one."

"That's how it *feels*," said Mia, tugging harder.

A little bell rang as they opened the door. A flush of warm air rushed out, plucking at Josie's hair. Her breath caught; her arms prickled with goose bumps. There, on the threshold of the bookstore, she felt an unexpected lightning bolt of certainty, as she had in her cliché of a dream: Something was about to change.

CHAPTER 2

Natural light from the shop's windows slashed across wooden bookcases, the beams dancing with dust specks. Exposed wood rafters still boasted their bark. A quote was painted high on a wall in silver-outlined yellow:

“Our truest life is when we are in dreams awake.”

~Thoreau

Customers wandered from book to book like honeybees over flowering sage. Josie marveled that everyone seemed at home, as if the labyrinth of bookcases created a clear pattern, as if the thousands of different book covers weren't at all intimidating.

“Mia, why don't we go—” Josie started.

But Mia had spotted a toy-train table in the kids' section and run off.

“May I help you find something?” The bookseller

wore a red apron embroidered with the name WALKING SHADOW BOOKS. That was as high as Josie's glance reached. She was afraid if she made eye contact, he would detect that she didn't belong there.

"No thanks, just browsing," Josie said, turning away so he wouldn't try to be helpful again. She walked with purpose to the nearest shelf and took out a book, scanning the back cover and nodding thoughtfully in what she hoped was a convincing manner. Her acting was a little rusty. Josie hadn't performed so much as an audition monologue since coming to Montana. And she hadn't read a novel for fun since sophomore year.

Slowly, Josie became aware of a conversation two women were having on the other side of the bookcase.

"You aren't going to believe it. It's like Tom all over again."

"What happened?"

"So first Brittany tells me Kevin's been working late."

"Uh-oh."

"Uh, *yeah*. And he suddenly has business trips every other weekend."

"Uh-oh."

"Uh, *yeah*. And when he *is* home, Brittany says he's distracted and distant."

By now Josie was listening very, very hard, a book titled *The Energy Diet: How to Chant Away Twenty Pounds!* frozen in her hand.

"Uh. Oh." This second woman didn't say those

words like *no, that's terrible news* so much as *pass the popcorn, extra butter*.

“Exactly,” said the first woman. “And I wasn’t going to say anything, because you know me, but then she went and asked me, ‘How could this happen to us? We were high school sweethearts!’ And I was like, ‘Brittany, that was the whole problem. Everybody knows that relationships that start in high school never last—’”

And suddenly Josie fell flat on her back.

She’d been leaning closer and closer, resting her hand on what she thought was a wooden bookshelf—but no. It was one of those wobbly cardboard displays. The books it had held now lay scattered around her. A final one slipped out of the slanting display. She read its title—*Acute Love Triangle*—the split second before it pegged her on the forehead.

And then the two women were standing over her.

“You okay?” asked the first. The blonder one.

“Um . . .”

There was something Trophy Wife about them: big hair heavily sprayed, big breasts in blouses buttoned low to welcome the spring, big diamonds on wedding rings, dangling from spray-on-brown hands. When they pulled Josie to her feet, they were standing so close she was inside the atmosphere of their gardenia perfume.

“You’re not okay, are you?” said the Blonder Trophy Wife. And then she held out her long-nailed hands and pulled Josie into an embrace.

Josie was so startled she just stood there, dizzy in the perfume cloud and uncomfortably aware of the woman's enormous breasts pressing against her chest.

For a moment, the unexpected kindness of the hug lodged in Josie's throat, ramming into her already-lodged fears about Justin and threatening to make her cry. But, quickly, awkwardness set in.

"It's just been . . . a weird day," said Josie, before remembering it was still morning. "I mean, already. I mean, lately."

Blonder Trophy Wife was now petting Josie's hair. "Boy trouble, am I right?"

"Uh . . . sort of . . . but not a big deal or anything. But thank you," Josie mumbled, and tried to extricate herself in a polite way, which involved patting the woman's back with one hand while disentangling her other hand, smiling gratefully while stepping back.

The Trophy Wives smiled at her, pity and perhaps understanding in their eyes.

"You're worth gold, you hear me?" said the less-blond one. "Gold."

"I'm okay," said Josie. "Really. I just . . . fell. But I'm fine. I'm new in the state, from Arizona originally, and actually I was kind of a big—"

No. No way was she just about to say that again. Josie felt her cheeks go fire hot and hoped the women hadn't filled in the blank.

“Nerd,” Josie blurted. “I was a big nerd. In high school. Never mind, I don’t know what I’m saying.”

Even though her brain told her it was stupid and immature and ridiculous, she still yearned to communicate it somehow to these women who had only seen her in a clumsy and vulnerable position. That she was somebody. That she *had been* somebody.

Josie turned away quickly and bumped directly into someone’s chest. That red apron again. Her legs wobbled, perhaps from the book blow to the head but, she admitted, probably more from the shock of the Trophy Wives’ conversation. *Everybody knows that relationships that start in high school . . .* Justin had always loved her so much, she didn’t just feel it in her belly but all the way down into her knees. But he had been distant lately, slow to answer texts, calling less frequently. Was he phasing her out?

The bookseller was still standing there. Josie forced her gaze to leave his apron and scan up.

He was excessively handsome, the kind of guy she imagined trophy wives would hire to be the pool boy, if they lived in a state where pools were a thing. He had a deep olive skin tone, wore his black hair a little long, a little unruly, in that *let’s pretend I woke up like this* way, and he sported thick-framed, geek-chic glasses.

“Can I help you?” he asked, pushing up his glasses

with one finger in a manner that reminded her of Clark Kent.

After knocking over the display and everything, she felt she'd better buy something. She handed him the nearest thing: a bright pink *Play Princess!* magazine from a rack.

"Who is this for?" The magazine opened in his hand, revealing a vertical poster of a princess riding a sparkly unicorn. "Ooh, check out that centerfold."

"I only read it for the articles," said Josie.

"Can't I get something for *you*?" he asked. "Everyone needs to escape into a book, and I'm guessing it's been a while for you."

"How did you know?"

He smiled and shrugged. "I'm a professional."

Josie raised her eyebrow—he looked no older than college age, so she assumed he was a part-time, minimum-wage worker.

"I was practically raised in bookstores," he clarified. "And if I know anything, it's that you're never too old to develop your imagination." He gestured grandly to a poster on a bookcase end: DEVELOP YOUR IMAGINATION: READ!

Josie laughed. "Okay, give me something light and fun that doesn't force me to think."

"You got it."

He scanned a bookshelf and pulled out a paperback. Josie was relieved it wasn't a hardcover. It would be so awkward to explain that it was too expensive for her. She had Victoria's credit card for grocery purchases and such, so she gave him that for the princess magazine, but she used her debit card for herself.

DEBT. DEBT. DEBT. The words clanged in her skull. *I'm not ready for knee-shaking, life-altering debt. I'm still a teenager!* She had to get ahold of the bank ASAP.

Josie took the paperback from the bookseller. The title, *The Highwayman Came Riding*, was emblazoned in white, curly font across a cover in heavy greens, pinks, and golds. A pale blond woman in clothing from some previous century was swooning in the arms of a tanned man with a hard, chiseled, hairless chest. Her dress was slipping off her shoulders, and her breasts—just too large and too wild to be constrained by clothing—appeared to be fighting for the nearest exit. Josie blushed, wondering what about her made the bookseller think that this was the book for her.

She turned it to read the back cover. The words looked tiny, blurry. Had that copy of *Acute Love Triangle* hit her harder than she'd thought? She held the book back at arm's length and the words crisped up a little.

"What's the matter with me?" she muttered.

"Are you fairly new to Montana?" he asked. "Did you move from sea level?"

“Yes . . .” Josie squinted at him. “How did you know?”

“Just guessing. Here, try these.” He handed her a pair of reading glasses from a drawer behind the counter.

She almost laughed and put them on just to humor him, but as soon as she did, she could clearly read the back cover. She gasped and took them off. The text was blurry again.

“I know, you’re too young for reading glasses,” he said. “You’ve never worn them before. Only grannies need them. I hear it all the time.”

“You do?”

“From people whose eyes haven’t adjusted to the high altitude yet. Usually it only affects them in the mornings and then goes away. You can keep the glasses. They were a free sample a supplier sent us.”

Great, so his estimation of her was broke, granny-eyed, and likely to swoon in the arms of bare-chested men.

She stuffed the glasses into her purse.

“You don’t have to take them off on my account,” he said. “Glasses are, you know, sexy . . .”

By his tone, he might have been saying, *How about this weather we’re having?*, so it took her a moment of squinting at him before she realized that he was flirting. Maybe?

“Um . . . that’s okay,” she said.

“Ooh, that’s a good book,” said another red-aproned

book clerk, eyeing Josie's purchase. She was blond, but unlike the Trophy Wives, her skin seemed to have never seen the sun: not real, fake, or sprayed on. She wore smart-girl glasses, like a ridiculously gorgeous starlet in a movie trying and failing to look nerdy. "Seriously, don't save that one for a rainy day; dive in now. You'll thank me later."

She winked.

"Okay . . .," said Josie.

The blond book clerk wrapped the other bookseller's arms around her waist and leaned back against his chest. "Have you read that one yet?" she asked him.

"No, but if she does, I promise I will too." He smiled shyly at Josie and stepped away from Blondie. "This is my sister, Bianca. The bookstore's a family business."

"The family that works together stays together," said Bianca.

"I'm Deo, by the way," he said. "*D-E-O*."

"Did you know your name is Greek?" Josie said and then immediately wished she hadn't. Trying to teach someone about their own name was just pathetic.

"Is it? Hey, will you come back and tell me what you think about the book?" asked Deo. "I've heard from other customers that it's super engrossing, and I'd love your feedback."

He smiled at her again. And her pulse snapped in her throat.

She'd been so isolated since coming to Montana,

passing most of each day alone in the condo, even when Mia was at preschool. It had been a while since she'd felt so *seen*.

A tiny, melancholy voice inside warned her she was unworthy of human attention. Josie broke eye contact first.

Mia ran up. "Mommy! That boy took the train I was playing with."

Josie laughed nervously, glancing at Deo. "I'm not your mommy, Mia."

Mia snorted in frustration at her mistake. "*Josie!* That boy stole my train!"

Josie smiled at Deo and Bianca. "I'm really not her mommy. Her mom. She just says it wrong sometimes. She's my, um, charge. Or ward. Or . . . I'm her nanny. Is what I'm trying to say. Not my kid. I'm single or whatever."

"Kids," said Deo with a head shake and a grin.

"Totally. *Kids*," said Josie.

Josie grabbed Mia and hurried out before there was any more awkward flirting or penetrating looks from dazzlingly blond sisters.

Deo called after her, "Come back soon!"

CHAPTER 3

They were heading toward the park, Mia staring in wonder at *Play Princess!*, when Josie's cell sang out the ringtone: "All That Jazz." Josie answered the video call, and Nina's face appeared on her screen. She had a long, angular face, her cheeks warm as if used to the sun, and one side of her hair was shaved away, the long ends dyed a vibrant purple.

"Wow," said Josie.

"You like?" said Nina, patting her hair. "I'm on my way to choir and only have five seconds but I wanted to show you."

"Love the hair. But I just got a pair of reading glasses, Nina. Reading glasses."

"Uh-huh," said Nina, distracted.

"I repeat, reading glasses."

Nina's gaze snapped back to her phone's camera.

"Oh, wait, what? That doesn't seem right."

"I know! Maybe there's something wrong with me."

“You mean, besides the fact that your favorite drink is root beer mixed with heavy cream?”

“I call it a root beer melt and it’s delicious and the cream cuts the sweetness and someday you will agree with me. But no, I mean wrong with me *medically*.”

“Heeeyy!” Nina called out to someone, and she smiled that smile Josie knew to be genuine. “Sorry, I gotta run. We need to talk later, okay?”

“Yes, please call back.”

Josie blew a kiss. And wondered who Nina was smiling at like that.

She’d only just hung up when her phone buzzed with a text.

ROXANNE

Hey Jos! It’s been forever. Guess what . . . I’m coming to New York this summer!!! I want to see you. What are you in again? Can you get me tix?

Josie quickly deleted the text. *Live with what you’ve got. Expect no more. Pull life’s blanket over your head and shut it all off . . .*

She took deep, cleansing breaths and looked at the sky.

Missoula sat in a valley surrounded by bare hills, its bluish-greenness nourished by melting snow. The Clark Fork River tumbled through Hellgate Canyon and split Missoula in half. Josie was aiming for a park in a crook of the river she’d found by examining satellite images on her phone. As they neared, the air smelled increasingly

springy, and Josie wrinkled her nose at the heavy scents of pollen and tree sap.

In the fifty-five-degree weather, college students were out in shorts and bare feet. Josie passed a dark-haired guy and a girl who were playing Frisbee. On a bench behind them, a white guy in a cowboy hat and boots was plucking out chords on a guitar. Another guy, with blond dreadlocks wafting the scent of patchouli, asked to join the game, and the college girl tossed the Frisbee in his direction. He caught it in a neat swipe behind his back. The scene looked ready-made for a brochure snapshot: *Visit Missoula, Montana!*

The only things Josie really knew about Missoula was from her online research: it was a college town just south of the Flathead Reservation and full of a mix of people from retired loggers to literati to environmentalists to sovereign citizens. And second-home Californians, but it was clear that everybody hated them equally.

Josie smiled at the Frisbee players in a way she hoped looked nothing like a second-home Californian.

Beyond the grass where Frisbee was happening, a playground sprouted out of a sandy circle. Several children around Mia's age climbed, ran, screamed, tossed, and fell, and Mia immediately ran to join in.

The only non-children near the playground squished together on a single bench, but they looked too young to be parents. Fellow nannies? Josie's pulse sped up; she

was way more excited at the prospect of peers than she'd anticipated. She hadn't quite realized until now just how much she'd been isolating herself.

Besides, Josie had made a promise to hook Mia up with some friends. Which meant playdates. Which meant Josie had to score some phone numbers today or face tiny-girl wrath.

The probable nannies—two girls and one curly-haired guy—each held a copy of the same book. There was a naturalness to their style that was unnatural. Plaid shirts beneath V-neck sweaters, sleeves cuffed just so. Makeup so light you might be fooled into thinking their cheeks were naturally blushing and their lips always this glossy pink.

Josie inched closer, hoping the trio would notice her and invite her into their conversation.

“. . . the point-of-view shift allows the reader to empathize with the narwhal,” the guy was saying.

“But at what cost?” said one of the girls, who looked South Asian. “The juxtaposition of the slight—even anemic—prose with the more romantic passages—”

“Is brilliant,” interrupted the blond white girl.

The other two nodded solemnly, absorbing the thought.

“The narwhal's narrative cuts through the superfluous prose like a warm knife through cheese,” the blond girl continued.

“Brilliant,” said the curly-haired guy.

“So deft,” said the other girl.

“Hey . . . there . . . ,” said Josie.

The three looked up. Josie wasn’t sure if they were squinting in the sunlight or scowling at the interruption. She reminded herself that she’d already binge-watched her way through two streaming services and, imagining a future with Montana friends to hang out with, took a breath and went on.

“Hey, how are you? I’m Josie. Josie Pie.”

The two looked to the blond girl, allowing her the first reaction to this newcomer. So many blondes in Montana! And they all seemed to wield such power!

The blonde smiled coolly and said, “Josie Pie? What a unique name.”

The other two laughed. Josie joined them, though she wasn’t sure why. She cleared her throat.

“So, I moved to Missoula a month ago.”

“Welcome to the neighborhood,” said the blonde. “I’m Misty.”

“Hey, Misty.” Josie exhaled. Introductions! This conversation was improving.

“This is Meaghan, and this is Marcus,” she said, indicating her bench mates. “We were in the same lit course at U of M last year, and when we discovered we were all also nannies—”

“Misty said, we should have a nanny book club!” said Meaghan. “Do you go to U of M too?”

“No,” said Josie. “But I *am* a nanny!”

“Cool.” Misty tilted her head. “So, do you want to tell us your real name?”

Josie blushed. How did they know? Pie was Justin’s last name, but she’d liked how it sounded with her first name so she’d adopted it when she moved to New York. So memorable, she’d thought. A perfect stage name!

“What do you mean?”

“How do you spell your last name?” Misty asked.

“*P-I-E*,” said Josie.

“Oh. It’s just . . .” Misty glanced at Meaghan and Marcus, her gestures contrite. “Josie Pye—*P-Y-E*—that’s the name of a character from *Anne of Green Gables*? That classic of Canadian literature? You’ve read it?”

Josie had. She felt her face drain of blood. Josie Pye! That mean girl who always teased Anne! She’d read the books in middle school, before she’d met Justin, but how had she never realized? A quick conversation changer—

“Um . . . did you know that in the US there is an average of eighty-seven people per square mile, but in Montana there are only six people per square mile? I’ve had a lot of free time, been googling information about my new state, as one does.” Josie expected them to laugh, so when they didn’t, she did for them. “Six people per square mile! Must be why it’s been so hard for me to meet new people here! So few of you! Spread out so far! I have to hunt you down!”

“I hunt,” said Misty. “Mostly deer. Sometimes fowl—pheasant, duck, goose . . .”

Meaghan and Marcus nodded.

“Humans are carnivores by nature,” said Misty, “but how much more humane to consume an animal taken in the wild than one raised in a cage, don’t you agree?”

“Um . . . that’s Mia on the slide,” said Josie. “The girl I nanny.”

“Mine is Ahab,” said Misty, indicating a toddler in a sweater vest over a collared shirt, digging in the sand.

“There’s my Atticus,” said Marcus. His charge was about four years old and wearing a navy-blue jumpsuit with white piping.

“Agamemnon is over there,” said Meaghan, pointing to a boy in an oversized wool sweater and corduroys.

“They’re adorable!” said Josie. “I promised Mia I’d find her new friends today. So, do you come here often? Um, that came out wrong . . .”

“Every morning,” said Misty.

“For book club,” said Meaghan, holding up a novel titled *Depression, Death, and Narwhals*.

“No way, what a coincidence!” said Josie.

“Oh, you’ve read it?” asked Meaghan.

“That? No. I meant that you’re having a book club, because I have a book! With me right now! I’m not much of a reader usually—”

Josie noticed their expressions darken.

“I mean, I totally used to be! Like in junior high! And high school too, at first anyway. I read a ton of books, and not just for class, but actually for fun.”

Expressions got even darker.

Josie dug through her purse for her new book. “It just feels like serendipity, is what I’m trying to say, that on the day I decide to get back into reading I would meet three nannies who are readers and watch kids the same age as Mia.” She proudly held up *The Highwayman Came Riding*.

“Serendipity, right?” she said again.

No one responded.

“Am I using that word correctly?” she whispered.

Meaghan glanced at Misty before speaking. “Um, Josie?” she said in a patient, helpful kind of tone. “That book you’re holding. It’s a tawdry romance. And a tawdry romance is not the sort of book one would bring to a book club.”

“Oh.”

Misty smiled an equally patient, helpful kind of smile. “You are what you read, you know.”

Josie nodded. She didn’t dare say anything else. Especially as she still wasn’t certain she’d used *serendipity* correctly.

A silence followed that was only slightly more awkward than the conversation had been. And then Misty said, “Let’s take a look at the passage on page forty-seven, where the narrator describes the orphan girl with such brutalizing detail one fears her bones might break under the weight of our scrutiny.”

The trio opened their books, and Misty began to

read aloud. Something about their posture, their intensity, reminded Josie of the Three Fates, perhaps from a painting she'd seen somewhere. She walked away before they could decide *her* fate.

A surge of anger tingled in her toes and rushed up through her middle, into her face, bringing both a hot flush to her cheeks and a feeling that, if she were a cartoon, her eyes would be blazing red. *Don't they know who I am?* came the sincere but also instantly ridiculous thought.

No, Josie Pie, they don't know who you are, because you aren't Millennial High School's precious rising star Josie Sergakis here. Or anywhere, anymore.

She waved to Mia out of guilt for having failed to secure playdates. But the little girl didn't notice, busy trying to recruit Agamemnon to play pirates by shouting, "Come here, scurvy wench!"

Agamemnon started to cry.

Josie pretended not to notice, busying herself by scouting out a place to sit. The trio had taken the only bench in the shade of the cottonwood trees, but after a month of cold-weather house arrest, Josie was open to sunshine. She spotted a bench conveniently far away from the trio.

The bench was weather-beaten—ancient wooden slats cracked and peeling, metal joints rusted orange, the weeds beneath it tall, their heads nosing up through the slats. One overachieving bush had sprouted up beside it,

stretching its arms over most of the bench as if aggressively saving a seat for someone who was clearly very late. Josie scooted the bush over the side and sat down, crunching dead weeds beneath her.

She dialed the bank again.

“All of our customer-service agents are taking other calls. You are FIFTY-SEVENTH in line.”

The hold music started up, and Josie’s head started to pound. *Nope, can’t do it right now.* She ended the call, leaned back, and breathed.

The sun was warm on her dark hair, the sound of the river at her back soothingly peaceful. There was nothing to distract her, and her brain began to mull. Mull fiercely over one particular thing.

Everybody knows that relationships that start in high school . . .

She’d worried before that she might be naive. After all, who stays with their high school boyfriend forever? But the way he used to look at her . . . how could someone who’d loved her marrow-deep suddenly just stop?

Well, what did she think would happen after she practically ran away from him across state borders, not once but twice? A weird, sharp laugh coughed out of her throat.

The trio glanced at her. She saw herself through their eyes—an oddly named, slouchy-dressed, anxious nanny not in college like them, sitting alone on a bench and laughing crazily to herself. Josie quickly picked up her book and opened it.

The words on the page were blurry. She shoved on the wretched glasses and hoped the trio didn't look at her. And then kinda hoped they did—maybe reading glasses made her look more mature and intelligent.

Or sexy.

She snorted a laugh and began to read.



CHAPTER 1: An Alarming Turn of Events

Lady Fontaine pressed her gloved fingertips to the carriage window as if she could touch the jade-green woods on the other side. She had grown up in the tame countryside of southern France, vineyards and pleasant parks, wandering no farther from home than a walk to the church or a picnic by the tame little stream. And now to leave Ville de Marguerite for the first time, and under such strange circumstances! A hurried letter from her father: *Come to me in Paris at once. Bring only your most trusted servants. Tell no one where you are going. Travel safely and hurry.*

His words awoke something inside her. Perhaps she had been half asleep most of her life, only now realizing there was so much more to the world than a walk to church. Like secrets. And danger. And

dark, mysterious woods that hid who-knew-what. It almost made her want to open the carriage door and . . .

No. Desires for wild landscapes and mysteries were uncouth and uncivil. She was Lady Fontaine de Marguerite. She was the daughter of the Marquis de Marguerite, a high-ranking nobleman in the French aristocracy. And a lady's place was not to think and dream but to sit quietly, look pretty, and be ready to serve her father. And, someday, her husband.

She sighed, her bosom swelling in the confines of her corset.

She did not know how beautiful she was. Whenever she caught sight of the carriage driver or footman eyeing her, she assumed there was something amiss. A lock of hair fallen out. A stain on her dress. She could not guess that the men were drinking in the sight of their employer's daughter and perhaps wishing . . .

Josie was already so engrossed in the words that it took her a moment to realize the colors were changing—the white page had a tinge of blue; the space around the book was spitting beams of yellow and orange. Instinctively, she let go of the book to grab the bench

for stability, but nothing fell from her hand. The book was gone. And so, it seemed, was her eyesight. Was she actually going blind? The colors of the park, greens and browns and grays, were blurs in her shaking vision, swirls like the kaleidoscopic shapes that light took when she shut her eyes tight. She held her breath and waited for the world to come back into focus. Or for death, whichever came first.