

**THE  
WIFE  
BETWEEN  
US**

*A NOVEL*

**GREER HENDRICKS**

**& SARAH PEKKANEN**

**THE  
FIRST  
FOUR  
CHAPTERS**

THE  
WIFE  
BETWEEN  
US

GREER HENDRICKS

AND

SARAH PEKKANEN

# PROLOGUE

SHE WALKS BRISKLY DOWN the city sidewalk, her blond hair bouncing against her shoulders, her cheeks flushed, a gym bag looped over her forearm. When she reaches her apartment building, her hand dips into her purse and pulls out her keys. The street is loud and busy, with yellow cabs racing by, commuters returning from work, and shoppers entering the deli on the corner. But my eyes never stray from her.

She pauses in her entryway and briefly glances back over her shoulder. An electrical charge seems to pulse through me. I wonder if she feels my stare. Gaze detection, it's called—our ability to sense when someone is observing us. An entire system of the human brain is devoted to this genetic inheritance from our ancestors, who relied on the trait to avoid becoming an animal's prey. I've cultivated this defense in myself, the sensation of static rising over my skin as my head instinctively lifts to search out a pair of eyes. I've learned the danger of dismissing that warning.

But she simply turns in the opposite direction, then opens her door and disappears inside, never looking my way.

She is oblivious to what I have done to her.

She is unaware of the damage I have wrought; the ruin I have set in motion.

To this beautiful young woman with the heart-shaped face and lush

body—the woman my husband, Richard, left me for—I'm as invisible as the pigeon scavenging on the sidewalk next to me.

She has no idea what will happen to her if she continues like this. None at all.

## CHAPTER ONE

NELLIE COULDN'T SAY what woke her. But when she opened her eyes, a woman wearing her white, lacy wedding gown stood by the foot of her bed, looking down at her.

Nellie's throat closed around a scream, and she lunged for the baseball bat leaning against her nightstand. Then her vision adjusted to the grainy dawn light and the pounding of her heart softened.

She let out a tight laugh as she realized she was safe. The illusion was merely her wedding dress, ensconced in plastic, hanging on the back of her closet door, where she'd placed it yesterday after picking it up from the bridal shop. The bodice and full skirt were stuffed with crumpled tissue to maintain the shape. Nellie collapsed back onto her pillow. When her breathing steadied, she checked the blocky blue numbers on her nightstand clock. Too early, again.

She stretched her arms overhead and reached with her left hand to turn off the alarm before it could blare, the diamond engagement ring Richard had given her feeling heavy and foreign on her finger.

Even as a child, Nellie had never been able to fall asleep easily. Her mother didn't have the patience for drawn-out bedtime rituals, but her father would gently rub her back, spelling out sentences over the fabric of her nightgown. *I love you* or *You're super special*, he'd write, and she would try to guess the message. Other times he'd trace patterns,

circles, stars, and triangles—at least until her parents divorced and he moved out when she was nine. Then she'd lie alone in her twin bed under her pink-and-purple-striped comforter and stare at the water stain that marred her ceiling.

When she finally dozed off, she usually slept hard for a good seven or eight hours—so deeply and dreamlessly that her mother sometimes had to physically shake her to awaken her.

But following an October night in her senior year of college, that suddenly changed.

Her insomnia worsened sharply, and her sleep became fractured by vivid dreams and abrupt awakenings. Once, she came downstairs to breakfast in her sorority house and her Chi Omega sister told her she'd been yelling something unintelligible. Nellie had attempted to brush it off: "Just stressed about finals. The Psych Stat exam is supposed to be a killer." Then she'd left the table to get another cup of coffee.

After that, she'd forced herself to visit the college counselor, but despite the woman's gentle coaxing, Nellie couldn't talk about the warm early-fall night that had begun with bottles of vodka and laughter and ended with police sirens and despair. Nellie had met with the therapist twice, but canceled her third appointment and never went back.

Nellie had told Richard a few details when she'd awoken from one of her recurring nightmares to feel his arms tightening around her and his deep voice whispering in her ear, "I've got you, baby. You're safe with me." Entwined with him, she felt a security she realized she'd yearned for her entire life, even before the incident. With Richard beside her, Nellie was finally able to succumb again to the vulnerable state of deep sleep. It was as if the unsteady ground beneath her feet had stabilized.

Last night, though, Nellie had been alone in her old ground-floor brownstone apartment. Richard was in Chicago on business, and her best friend and roommate, Samantha, had slept over at her latest boyfriend's. The noises of New York City permeated the walls: honking horns, occasional shouts, a barking dog . . . Even though the Upper East Side crime rate was the lowest in the borough, steel bars secured

the windows, and three locks reinforced the door, including the thick one Nellie had installed after she'd moved in. Still, she'd needed an extra glass of Chardonnay before she'd been able to drift off.

Nellie rubbed her gritty eyes and slowly peeled herself out of bed. She pulled on her terry-cloth robe, then looked at her dress again, wondering if she should try to clear space in her tiny closet so it would fit. But the skirt was so full. At the bridal boutique, surrounded by its poufy and sequin-encrusted sisters, it had looked elegantly simple, like a chignon amidst bouffants. But next to the tangle of clothes and flimsy IKEA bookshelf in her cramped bedroom, it seemed to veer dangerously close to a Disney Princess ensemble.

Too late to change it, though. The wedding was approaching fast and every detail was in place, down to the cake topper—a blond bride and her handsome groom, frozen in a perfect moment.

“Jeez, they even look like you two,” Samantha had said when Nellie showed her a picture of the vintage china figurines that Richard had emailed. The topper had belonged to his parents, and Richard had retrieved it from the storage room in his apartment building's basement after he proposed. Sam had wrinkled her nose. “Ever think he's too good to be true?”

Richard was thirty-six, nine years older than Nellie, and a successful hedge fund manager. He had a runner's wiry build, and an easy smile that belied his intense navy-blue eyes.

For their first date, he'd taken her to a French restaurant and knowledgeably discussed white Burgundies with the sommelier. For their second, on a snowy Saturday, he'd told her to dress warmly and had shown up carrying two bright green plastic sleds. “I know the best hill in Central Park,” he'd said.

He'd worn a pair of faded jeans and had looked just as good in them as he did in his well-cut suits.

Nellie hadn't been joking when she replied to Sam's question by saying, “Only every day.”

Nellie smothered another yawn as she padded the seven steps into the tiny galley kitchen, the linoleum cold under her bare feet. She flicked on the overhead light, noticing Sam had—again—made a mess

of the honey jar after sweetening her tea. The viscous liquid oozed down the side, and a cockroach struggled in the sticky amber pool. Even after years of living in Manhattan, the sight still made her queasy. Nellie grabbed one of Sam's dirty mugs out of the sink and trapped the roach under it. *Let her deal with it*, she thought. As she waited for her coffee to brew, she flipped open her laptop and began checking email—a coupon from the Gap; her mother, who'd apparently become a vegetarian, asking Nellie to make sure there would be a meat-free option at the wedding dinner; a notice that her credit-card payment was due.

Nellie poured her coffee into a mug decorated with hearts and the words *World's #1 Teacher*—she and Samantha, who also taught at the Learning Ladder preschool, had a dozen nearly identical ones jammed in the cupboard—and took a grateful sip. She had ten spring parent-teacher conferences scheduled today for her Cubs, her class of three-year-olds. Without caffeine, she'd be in danger of falling asleep in the “quiet corner,” and she needed to be on her game. First up were the Porters, who'd recently fretted over the lack of Spike Jonze-style creativity being cultivated in her classroom. They'd recommended she replace the big dollhouse with a giant tepee and had followed up by sending her a link to one the Land of Nod sold for \$229.

She'd miss the Porters only slightly less than the cockroaches when she moved in with Richard, Nellie decided. She looked at Samantha's mug, felt a surge of guilt, and used a tissue to quickly scoop up the bug and flush it down the toilet.

Her cell phone rang as Nellie was turning on the shower. She wrapped herself in a towel and hurried into the bedroom to grab her purse. Her phone wasn't there, though; Nellie was forever misplacing it. She eventually dug it out of the folds of her comforter.

“Hello?”

No answer.

Caller ID showed a blocked number. A moment later a voice-mail alert appeared on her screen. She pressed a button to listen to it but only heard a faint, rhythmic sound. Breathing.

A telemarketer, she told herself as she tossed the phone back on the



bed. No big deal. She was overreacting, as she sometimes did. She was just overwhelmed. After all, in the next few weeks, she'd pack up her apartment, move in with Richard, and hold a bouquet of white roses as she walked toward her new life. Change was unnerving, and she was facing a lot of it all at once.

Still, it was the third call in as many weeks.

She glanced at the front door. The steel dead bolt was engaged.

She headed to the bathroom, then turned back and picked up her cell phone, bringing it with her. She placed it on the edge of the sink, locked the door, then slung her towel over the rod and stepped into the shower. She jumped back as the too-cold spray hit her, then adjusted the knob and rubbed her hands over her arms.

Steam filled the small space, and she let the water course over the knots in her shoulders and down her back. She was changing her last name after the wedding. Maybe she'd change her phone number, too.

She'd slipped on a linen dress and was swiping mascara over her blond eyelashes—the only time she wore much makeup or nice clothes to work was for parent-teacher conferences and graduation day—when her cell phone vibrated, the noise loud and tinny against the porcelain sink. She flinched, and her mascara wand streaked upward, leaving a black mark near her eyebrow.

She looked down to see an incoming text from Richard:

*Can't wait to see you tonight, beautiful. Counting the minutes. I love you.*

As she stared at her fiancé's words, the breath that had seemed stuck in her chest all morning loosened. *I love you, too*, she texted back.

She'd tell him about the phone calls tonight. Richard would pour her a glass of wine and lift her feet up onto his lap while they talked. Maybe he'd find a way to trace the hidden number. She finished getting ready, then picked up her heavy shoulder bag and stepped out in the faint spring sunshine.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE SHRIEK OF AUNT Charlotte's teakettle awakens me. Weak sunlight sneaks through the slats of the blinds, casting faint stripes across my body as I lay curled in a fetal position. How can it be morning already? Even after months of sleeping alone in a twin—not the king I once shared with Richard—I still lie only on the left side. The sheets beside me are cool. I am making room for a ghost.

Morning is the worst time because, for a brief moment, my brain is clear. The reprieve is so cruel. I huddle under the patchwork quilt, feeling as if a heavy weight is pinning me here.

Richard is probably with my pretty young replacement right now, his navy-blue eyes fixed on her as his fingertips trace the curve of her cheek. Sometimes I can almost hear him saying the sweet things he used to whisper to me.

*I adore you. I'm going to make you so happy. You are my world.*

My heart throbs, each steady beat almost painful. *Deep breaths*, I remind myself. It doesn't work. It never works.

When I've watched the woman Richard left me for, I'm always struck by how soft and innocent she is. So like me when Richard and I first met and he would cup my face between his palms, as gently as if it were a delicate flower he was afraid of damaging.

Even in those early, heady months, it sometimes seemed as if it—

*he*—were a bit scripted. But it didn't matter. Richard was caring, charismatic, and accomplished. I fell in love with him almost immediately. And I never doubted that he loved me, too.

He is finished with me now, though. I've moved out of our four-bedroom colonial home with its arched doorways and rich green sweep of lawn. Three of those bedrooms remained empty throughout our marriage, but the maid still cleaned them every week. I always found an excuse to leave the house when she opened those doors.

The wailing of an ambulance twelve stories below finally prompts me to get out of bed. I shower, then blow-dry my hair, noticing my roots are visible. I pull a box of Clairol Caramel Brown from under the sink to remind myself to touch them up tonight. Gone are the days when I paid—no, when Richard paid—hundreds of dollars for a cut and color.

I open the antique cherrywood armoire that Aunt Charlotte purchased at the GreenFlea Market and refurbished herself. I used to have a walk-in closet bigger than the room in which I now stand. Racks of dresses organized by color and season. Stacks of designer jeans in various states of distressed denim. A rainbow of cashmere lining one wall.

Those items never meant much to me. I usually just wore yoga pants and a cozy sweater. Like a reverse commuter, I changed into a more stylish ensemble shortly before Richard came home.

Now, though, I am grateful that when Richard asked me to leave our Westchester house, I took a few suitcases of my finer clothes. As a sales associate at Saks on the designer-label third floor, I depend on commissions, so it is vital I project an aspirational image. I stare at the dresses lined up in the armoire with an almost military precision and select a robin's-egg-colored Chanel. One of the signature buttons is dented, and it hangs more loosely than the last time I wore it, a lifetime ago. I don't need a scale to inform me I've lost too much weight; at five feet six, I have to take in even my size 4s.

I enter the kitchen, where Aunt Charlotte is eating Greek yogurt with fresh blueberries, and kiss her, the skin on her cheek feeling as soft as talcum powder.

"Vanessa. Sleep well?"

“Yes,” I lie.

She stands at her kitchen counter, barefoot and in her loose tai chi outfit, peering through her glasses as she scratches out a grocery list on the back of an old envelope between spoonfuls of her breakfast. For Aunt Charlotte, momentum is the key to emotional health. She’s always urging me to join her for a stroll through SoHo, or an art lecture at the Y, or a film at Lincoln Center . . . but I’ve learned activity doesn’t help me. After all, obsessive thoughts can follow you anywhere.

I nibble a piece of whole-grain toast and tuck an apple and a protein bar in my bag for lunch. I can tell Aunt Charlotte is relieved I’ve landed a job, and not just because it seems as if I am finally getting better. I’ve disrupted her lifestyle; normally she spends mornings in an extra bedroom that doubles as her art studio, spreading rich oils onto canvases, creating dreamy worlds that are so much more beautiful than the one we inhabit. But she’ll never complain. When I was a little girl and my mom needed what I thought of as her “lights-out days,” I’d call Aunt Charlotte, my mother’s older sister. All it took was the whispered words “She’s resting again,” and my aunt would appear, dropping her overnight bag on the floor and reaching out with paint-stained hands, folding me into an embrace that smelled of linseed oil and lavender. Without children of her own, she had the flexibility to design her own life. It was my great fortune that she put me at the center of it when I needed her most.

“Brie . . . pears . . .” Aunt Charlotte murmurs as she jots the items on her list, her handwriting full of loops and swirls. Her steel-gray hair is swept up in a messy bun, and the eclectic place setting before her—a cobalt-blue glass bowl, a chunky purple pottery mug, a silver spoon—looks like the inspiration for a still-life painting. Her three-bedroom apartment is expansive since Aunt Charlotte and my uncle Beau, who died years ago, bought in this neighborhood before real-estate prices skyrocketed, but it has the feel of a funky old farmhouse. The wood floors slope and creak, and every room is painted a different color—buttercup yellow, sapphire blue, mint green.

“Another salon tonight?” I ask, and she nods.

Since I’ve been living with her, I’ve been as likely to find a group

of NYU freshmen as the *New York Times* art critic along with a few studio owners gathered in her living room. “Let me get the wine on my way home,” I offer. It is important that Aunt Charlotte not see me as a burden. She is all I have left.

I stir my coffee and wonder if Richard is making his new love coffee and bringing it back to bed, where she’s drowsy and warm under the fluffy down comforter we used to share. I see her lips curve into a smile as she lifts the covers for him. Richard and I would often make love in the morning. “No matter what happens during the rest of the day, at least we had this,” he used to say. My stomach tightens and I push away my toast. I glance down at my Cartier Tank watch, a gift from Richard for our fifth anniversary, and trace a fingertip over the smooth gold.

I can still feel him lifting my arm to slip it onto my wrist. Sometimes I’m certain I catch on my own clothes—even though they’ve been cleaned—a whiff of the citrus scent of the L’Occitane soap he washed himself with. He feels linked to me always, as close yet diaphanous as a shadow.

“I think it would be good for you to join us tonight.”

It takes a moment for me to reorient myself. “Maybe,” I say, knowing I won’t. Aunt Charlotte’s eyes are soft; she must realize I’m thinking about Richard. She isn’t privy to the real story of our marriage, though. She thinks he chased youth, casting me aside, following the pattern of so many men before him. She thinks I’m a victim; just another woman cut down by the approach of middle age.

The compassion would be erased from her expression if she knew of my role in our demise.

“I have to run,” I say. “But text me if you need anything else from the store.”

I secured my sales job only a month ago, and already I’ve been given two warnings about my tardiness. I need a better way to fall asleep; the pills my doctor prescribed leave me sluggish in the morning. I haven’t worked in almost a decade. If I lose this job, who else will hire me?

I sling my heavy bag over my shoulder with my nearly pristine Jimmy Choos peeking out of the top, lace up my battered Nikes, and

put in my earbuds. I listen to psychology podcasts during my fifty-block walk to Saks; hearing about other people's compulsions sometimes pulls me away from my own.

The muted sun that greeted me when I awoke tricked me into thinking it was warming up outside. I brace myself against the slap of a sharp late-spring wind, then begin the trek from the Upper West Side to Midtown Manhattan.

My first customer is an investment banker who introduces herself as Nancy. Her work is consuming, she explains, but her morning meeting was unexpectedly canceled. She's petite, with wide-set eyes and a pixie cut, and her boyish frame makes fitting her a challenge. I'm glad for the distraction.

"I have to dress powerfully or they won't take me seriously," she says. "I mean, look at me. I still get carded!"

As I gently nudge her away from a structured gray pantsuit, I notice her fingernails are bitten to the quick. She sees where my gaze has landed and she tucks her hands into the pockets of her blazer. I wonder how long she'll last in her job. Maybe she'll find another one—something service oriented, perhaps, involving the environment or children's rights—before the field breaks her spirit.

I reach for a pencil skirt and patterned silk blouse. "Maybe something brighter?" I suggest.

As we walk the floor, she chatters about the five-borough bike race that she's hoping to compete in next month, despite her lack of training, and the blind date her colleague wants to set her up on. I pull more items, sneaking glances at her to better gauge her shape and skin tone.

Then I spot a stunning black-and-white floral Alexander McQueen knit and I stop walking. I lift a hand and run it gently down the fabric, my heart beginning to pound.

"That's pretty," Nancy says.

I close my eyes and remember an evening when I wore a dress nearly identical to this one.

*Richard coming home with a big white box tied with a red bow. "Wear it tonight," he'd said as I modeled it. "You look gorgeous." We'd sipped champagne at the Alvin Ailey gala and laughed with his colleagues. His hand had rested on my lower back. "Forget dinner," he'd whispered in my ear. "Let's head home."*

"Are you okay?" Nancy asks.

"Fine," I reply, but my throat threatens to close up around the words. "That dress isn't right for you."

Nancy looks surprised, and I realize my words came out too harshly.

"This one." I reach for a classic tomato-red sheath.

I walk toward the fitting room, the garments weighing heavily in my arms. "I think we have enough to begin with."

I hang the clothes on the rod lining one wall, trying to focus on the order in which I feel she should try them, beginning with a lilac jacket that will complement her olive skin. Jackets are the best place to start, I've learned, because a customer doesn't need to get undressed to evaluate them.

I locate a pair of stockings and heels so she can better assess the skirts and dresses, then swap out a few 0s for 2s. In the end, Nancy chooses the jacket, two dresses—including the red one—and a navy suit. I call a fitter to hem the suit skirt and excuse myself, telling Nancy I'll ring up her purchases.

Instead I'm drawn back to the black-and-white dress. Three are on the rack. I scoop them into my arms and take them to the stockroom, hiding them behind a row of damaged clothes.

I return with Nancy's credit card and receipt by the time she is slipping into her work clothes.

"Thank you," Nancy says. "I never would have picked these, but I'm actually excited to wear them."

This is the part of my job I actually enjoy—making my customers feel good. Trying on clothes and spending money causes most women to question themselves: *Do I look heavy? Do I deserve this? Is it me?* I know those doubts well because I have been on the inside of the dressing room many times, trying to figure out who I should be.

I slip a hanging bag over Nancy's new clothes and hand her the garments, and for a moment I wonder if Aunt Charlotte is right. If I keep

moving forward, maybe my mind will eventually follow my body's propulsion.

After Nancy leaves, I help a few more customers, then head back to the dressing rooms to restock unwanted items. As I smooth clothing on hangers, I overhear two women chatting in adjoining booths.

"Ugh, this Alaïa looks awful. I'm so bloated. I knew that waitress was lying when she said the soy sauce was low sodium."

I recognize the Southern lilt immediately: Hillary Searles, the wife of George Searles, one of Richard's colleagues. Hillary and I attended numerous dinner parties and business events over the years together. I have listened to her opine on public versus private schools, Atkins versus the Zone, and St. Barts versus the Amalfi Coast. I can't bear to listen to her today.

"Yoo-hoo! Is there a salesgirl out there? We need some other sizes," a voice calls.

A fitting-room door flies open and a woman emerges. She looks so much like Hillary, down to the matching ginger locks, that she can only be her sister. "Miss. Can you help us? Our other salesgirl seems to have completely vanished."

Before I can answer, I see a flash of orange and the offending Alaïa is flung over the top of the fitting-room door. "Do you have this in a forty-two?"

If Hillary spends \$3,100 on a dress, the commission is worth enduring the questions she'll throw at me.

"Let me check," I reply. "But Alaïa isn't the most forgiving brand, no matter what you've eaten for lunch. . . . I can bring you a forty-four in case it runs small."

"Your voice sounds so familiar." Hillary peeks out, hiding her sodium-bloated body behind the door. She shrieks and it's an effort to keep standing there as she gapes at me. "What are you doing here?"

Her sister chimes in, "Hill, who are you talking to?"

"Vanessa is an old friend. She's married—uh, she used to be married—to one of George's partners. Hang on a sec, girl! Let me just throw on some clothes." When she reappears, she smothers me in a hug, simultaneously engulfing me in her floral perfume.



“You look different! What’s changed?” She puts her hands on her hips and I force myself to endure her scrutiny. “For starters, you little wench, you’ve gotten so thin. You would have no trouble wearing the Alaïa. So, you’re working here now?”

“I am. It’s good to see you—”

I’ve never been so thankful to be interrupted by the ring of a cell phone. “Hello,” Hillary trills. “What? A fever? Are you sure? Remember the last time when she tricked you by— Okay, okay. I’ll be there right away.” She turns to her sister. “That was the school nurse. She thinks Madison is sick. Honestly, they send a kid home if they so much as sniffle.”

She leans in to give me another hug and her diamond earring scrapes across my cheek. “Let’s make a lunch date and properly catch up. Call me!”

As Hillary and her sister click-clack off toward the elevator, I spot a platinum bangle on the chair in the dressing room. I scoop it up and hurry to catch Hillary. I’m about to call her name when I hear her voice wafting back toward me. “Poor thing,” she says to her sister, and I detect real pity in her tone. “He got the house, the cars, everything . . .”

“Really? She didn’t lawyer up?”

“She turned into a disaster.” Hillary shrugs.

It’s as if I’ve slammed into an invisible wall.

I watch as she recedes in the distance. When she presses the button to summon the elevator, I head back to clean her discarded silks and linens off the dressing-room floor. But first, I slip the platinum bracelet onto my wrist.

Shortly before our marriage ended, Richard and I hosted a cocktail party at our home. That was the last time I saw Hillary. The evening began on a stressful note when the caterers and their staff failed to show up on time. Richard was irritated—with them, with me for not booking them an hour earlier, with the situation—but he gamely stepped behind a makeshift bar in our living room, mixing martinis and gin

and tonics, throwing back his head and laughing as one of his partners tipped him a twenty. I circulated among the guests, murmuring apologies for the inadequate wheel of Brie and triangle of sharp cheddar I'd set out, promising the real food would soon arrive.

"Honey? Can you grab a few bottles of the '09 Raveneau from the cellar?" Richard had called to me from across the room. "I ordered a case last week. They're on the middle shelf of the wine fridge."

I'd frozen, feeling as if everyone's eyes were on me. Hillary had been at the bar. It was probably she who'd requested that vintage; it was her favorite.

I remember moving in what felt like slow motion toward the basement, delaying the moment when I'd have to tell Richard, in front of all of his friends and business associates, what I already knew: There was no Raveneau in our cellar.

I pass the next hour or so waiting on a grandmother who requires a new outfit for the christening of her namesake and putting together a wardrobe for a woman who is taking a cruise to Alaska. My body feels like wet sand; the flicker of hope I'd experienced after helping Nancy has been extinguished.

This time, I see Hillary before I hear her voice.

She approaches as I'm hanging a skirt on a rack.

"Vanessa!" she calls. "I'm so glad you're still here. Please tell me you found—"

Her sentence is severed as her eyes land on my wrist.

I quickly slip off the bangle. "I didn't . . . I—I was worried about leaving it in the lost and found. . . . I figured you'd return for it, or I was going to call you."

The shadow clears from Hillary's eyes. She believes me. Or at least she wants to.

"Is your daughter all right?"

Hillary nods. "I think the little faker just wanted to skip math class." She giggles and twists the heavy band of platinum onto her wrist. "You

saved my life. George only gave it to me a week ago for my birthday. Can you imagine if I had to tell him I lost it? He'd divor—"

A flush blooms on her cheeks as she averts her eyes. Hillary was never unkind, I remember. Early on, she even used to make me laugh sometimes.

"How is George?"

"Busy, busy! You know how it is."

Another tiny pause.

"Have you seen Richard lately?" I aim for a lighthearted tone, but I fail. My hunger for information about him is transparent.

"Oh, now and then."

I wait, but it's clear she doesn't want to reveal more.

"Well! Did you want to try on that Alaïa?"

"I should get going. I'll come back another time, darling." But I sense Hillary won't. What she sees before her—the dented button on the Chanel that is two years old, the hairstyle that could benefit from a professional blowout—is a vision Hillary desperately hopes isn't contagious.

She gives me the briefest of hugs, then begins to leave. But she turns back.

"If it were me . . ." Her brow furrows; she is working through something. Making a decision. "Well, I guess I'd want to know."

What is coming has the feel of an onrushing train.

"Richard is engaged." Her voice seems to float toward me from a great distance away. "I'm sorry. . . . I just thought you might not have heard, and it seemed like . . ."

The roaring in my head suffocates the rest of her words. I nod and back away.

*Richard is engaged. My husband is actually going to marry her.*

I make it to a dressing room. I lean against a wall and slide down onto the floor, the carpet burning my thighs as my dress rides up. Then I drop my head into my hands and sob.

## CHAPTER THREE

ON ONE SIDE of the old steepled church that housed the Learning Ladder stood three turn-of-the-century grave markers, worn by age and hidden amid a canopy of trees. The other side contained a small playground with a sandbox and a blue-and-yellow climbing structure. Symbols of life and death bookending the church, which had witnessed countless ceremonies honoring both occasions.

One of the headstones was inscribed with the name Elizabeth Knapp. She'd died in her twenties and her grave was set a bit apart from the others. Nellie took the long way around the block, as she always did, to avoid passing the tiny cemetery. Still, she wondered about the young woman.

Her life could have been cut short by disease, or childbirth. Or an accident.

Had she been married? Did she have children?

Nellie set down her bag to unlock the childproof latch on the fence encircling the playground as the wind rustled through the trees. Elizabeth had been twenty-six or twenty-seven; Nellie couldn't remember which. The detail suddenly nagged at her.

She began to walk toward the cemetery to check, but the church's bell rang eight times, the deep, somber chords vibrating through the air and reminding her that her conferences would start in fifteen

minutes. A cloud drifted in front of the sun, and the temperature abruptly dropped.

Nellie turned and stepped through the gate, pulling it closed behind her, then rolled back the protective tarp covering the sandbox so it would be ready when the children came out to play. A sharp gust threatened to yank one end away. She fought back against it, then dragged over a heavy flowerpot to secure the edge.

She hurried into the building and down the stairs to the basement, where the preschool was. The earthy, rich scent of coffee announced that Linda, the director, had already arrived. Ordinarily, Nellie would have settled her things in her classroom before greeting Linda. But today she bypassed her empty room and continued down the hall, toward the yellow light spilling out of Linda's office, feeling the need to see a familiar face.

Nellie stepped in and discovered not just coffee but a platter of pastries. Fanning paper napkins beside a stack of Styrofoam cups was Linda, whose shiny dark bob and taupe pantsuit cinched by a crocodile belt wouldn't have been out of place at a board meeting. Linda didn't just dress like this for the parents—even on field day, she looked camera ready.

"Tell me those aren't chocolate croissants."

"From Dean and DeLuca," Linda confirmed. "Help yourself."

Nellie groaned. Just this morning the scale had revealed she still had five—okay, eight—pounds to lose before her wedding.

"Come on," Linda urged. "I got plenty to sweeten up the parents."

"These are Upper East Side parents," Nellie joked. "No one's going to eat sugary carbs." Nellie looked at the platter again. "Maybe just half." She divided one with a plastic knife.

She took a bite as she walked back to her classroom. The space wasn't fancy, but it was roomy, and high windows allowed in some natural light. The soft rug with an alphabet-train pattern running around the edges was where her Cubs sat crisscross—applesauce for story time; in the kitchen area, they donned tiny chef's hats and clattered pots and pans; and the dress-up corner held everything from doctor's coats to ballerina tutus to an astronaut's helmet.

Her mother had once asked Nellie why she didn't want to become a "real" teacher and hadn't understood why Nellie took offense at the question.

The feel of those pudgy, trusting hands in hers; that moment when a child deciphered letters on a page to sound out a word for the first time and looked up at Nellie in wonder; the freshness with which children interpreted the world—how could she explain how precious it all felt?

She'd always just known she wanted to teach, the way some kids feel destined to become writers, or artists.

Nellie licked a buttery flake off her fingertip, then took her planner out of her purse along with a stack of "report cards" she'd be distributing. Parents paid \$32,000 a year to send their kids here for a few hours a day; the tepee-link-sending Porters weren't alone in wanting things done a certain way. Every week, Nellie received emails, such as a recent one from the Levines requesting supplemental worksheets for gifted little Reese. Teachers' cell phone numbers were printed in the school directory in case of emergency, but some parents applied loose definitions to the word. Once Nellie fielded a call at five A.M. because Bennett had thrown up during the night and his mother was curious about what he'd eaten at school the previous day.

That sudden shrill ring in the darkness had prompted Nellie to turn on all the lights in her room even after she realized the call was innocuous. She'd burned off her surge of adrenaline by reorganizing her closet and dresser drawers.

"What a diva," her roommate, Sam, had said when Nellie recounted the call. "Why don't you turn off your phone when you go to sleep?"

"Good idea," Nellie had lied, knowing she'd never follow the advice. She didn't listen to loud music while she jogged or commuted to work, either. And she never walked home alone late at night.

If a threat was approaching, she wanted as much warning as possible.

Nellie was scribbling a few final notes at her desk when she heard a knock on the door and looked up to see the Porters, he in a navy pin-striped suit and she in a rose-colored dress. They looked as if they were on their way to the symphony.

“Welcome,” she said as they approached and shook her hand. “Please, sit down.” She suppressed a smile as they struggled to balance on the child-size chairs around the snack table. Nellie was sitting on one, too, but by now she was used to it.

“So, as you know, Jonah is a wonderful little boy,” she began. All of her conferences started with a Lake Wobegon tone, but in Jonah’s case, it was true. Nellie’s bedroom wall was decorated with paintings created by her favorite students, including Jonah’s depiction of her as a marshmallow woman.

“Have you noticed his pencil grip?” Mrs. Porter asked, taking a notebook and pen out of her purse.

“Um, I don’t—”

“It’s pronated,” Mr. Porter interrupted. He demonstrated by grasping his wife’s pen. “See how his hand curves in like this? What are your thoughts on whether we should sign him up for occupational therapy?”

“Well, he is only three and a half.”

“Three and three-quarters,” Mrs. Porter corrected.

“Right,” Nellie said. “A lot of kids haven’t developed the fine motor skills at that age to—”

“You’re from Florida, right?” Mr. Porter asked.

Nellie blinked. “How do you— I’m sorry, why do you ask?” There was no way she had told the Porters where she was from. She was always careful not to reveal too much about her background.

It wasn’t difficult to dodge questions once you learned the tricks. When someone asked about your childhood, you told them about the tree house your father built for you, and your black cat that thought he was a dog and would sit up and beg for a treat. If college came up, you focused on the football team’s undefeated season and your part-time job at a campus restaurant, where you once started a small fire while making toast and cleared the dining area. Tell colorful, drawn-out stories that deflect attention from the fact that you aren’t actually sharing anything. Avoid specifics that will separate you from the crowd. Be vague about the year you graduated. Lie, but only when completely necessary.

“Well, things are different here in New York,” Mr. Porter was saying. Nellie looked at him carefully. He was easily fifteen years older than she, and his accent suggested he’d been born in Manhattan. Their paths wouldn’t have crossed before now. How could he have known?

“We don’t want Jonah to fall behind,” Mr. Porter said as he leaned back in his chair, then scrambled to keep from overturning it.

“What my husband is trying to explain,” Mrs. Porter interjected, “is that we’ll be applying to kindergarten next fall. We’re looking at top-tier schools.”

“I understand.” Nellie pulled her focus back. “Well, it’s certainly your decision, but you may want to wait a year.” She knew Jonah was already signed up for Mandarin classes, karate, and music lessons. Twice this week she’d seen him yawn and rub his sleepy-looking eyes. At least he had plenty of time to build sand castles and stack blocks into towers while he was here.

“I wanted to let you know about something that happened when one of his classmates forgot to bring lunch,” Nellie began. “Jonah offered to share his, which showed such empathy and kindness . . .”

Her voice trailed off when Mr. Porter’s cell phone rang.

“Yep,” he said. He made eye contact with Nellie, holding her gaze.

She’d met him only twice before, at Parents’ Night and during the fall conference. He hadn’t stared at her or acted peculiarly.

Mr. Porter twirled his hand in rapid circles, indicating she should continue. Who was he speaking to?

“Do you do regular assessments of the kids?” Mrs. Porter asked.

“Sorry?”

Mrs. Porter smiled, and Nellie noticed her lipstick matched the exact hue of her dress. “They do at the Smith School. Every quarter. Academic readiness, small-group pre-reading circles based on ability, early multiplication initiatives . . .”

Multiplication? “I do assess the children.” Nellie felt her back straighten.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Mr. Porter said into the phone. She felt her gaze being pulled back to him.



“Not on multiplication . . . on, um . . . more basic skills like counting and letter recognition,” Nellie said. “If you’ll look on the back of the report card, you’ll see . . . I have categories.”

There was a moment of silence as Mrs. Porter scanned Nellie’s notes.

“Tell Sandy to get on it. Don’t lose the account.” Mr. Porter hung up and shook his head. “Are we done here?”

“Well,” Mrs. Porter said to Nellie, “I’m sure you’re busy.”

Nellie smiled, keeping her lips pressed together. *Yes, she wanted to say. I am busy. Yesterday I scrubbed that rug after a kid spilled chocolate milk on it. I bought a soft blanket for the quiet corner so your overstressed boy can rest. I pulled three late shifts this week at a restaurant where I waitress because what I earn here won’t cover my cost of living—and I still walked through these doors at eight every morning with energy for your children.*

She was heading back to Linda’s office to claim the other half of her croissant when she heard Mr. Porter’s booming voice: “I forgot my jacket.” He reentered her classroom and retrieved it from the back of the tiny chair.

“Why did you think I was from Florida?” Nellie blurted.

He shrugged. “My niece went to school there, too, at Grant University. I thought someone mentioned you did as well.”

That information wasn’t in her bio on the preschool website. She owned nothing with her college’s insignia—not a single sweatshirt or key chain or pennant.

*Linda must have given her credentials to the Porters—they seemed like the type of parents who would want to know,* Nellie told herself.

Still, she looked at him more carefully, trying to imagine his features on a young woman. She couldn’t recall any with the last name Porter. But that didn’t mean the woman hadn’t sat behind her in class or tried to rush her sorority.

“Well, my next conference is about to begin, so . . .”

He looked at the empty hallway, then back at her. “Sure. See you at graduation.” He whistled as he walked back down the hallway. Nellie watched until he disappeared through the door.

Richard rarely talked about his ex, so Nellie knew only a few things about her: She still lived in New York City. She and Richard had split up shortly before he met Nellie. She was pretty, with long dark hair and a narrow face—Nellie had done a Google search and come across a blurry thumbnail photo of her at a benefit.

And she'd been perpetually late, a habit that had irritated Richard.

Nellie sprinted the final block to the Italian restaurant, already regretting the two glasses of Pinot Grigio she'd had with the 3s and 4s teachers as a reward for surviving their conferences. They'd swapped war stories; Marnie, whose classroom was next to Nellie's, was declared the winner because one set of parents had sent their au pair, whose English wasn't very good, to represent them at the meeting.

Nellie had lost track of time until she checked her cell phone on the way to the bathroom. As she'd exited a stall, a woman nearly bumped into her. "Sorry!" Nellie had said reflexively. She'd moved to one side but dropped her bag, scattering its contents across the floor. The woman had stepped over the mess without a word and quickly entered a stall. ("Manners!" the preschool teacher in Nellie had longed to chastise as she knelt to retrieve her wallet and cosmetics.)

She made it to the restaurant eleven minutes late and pulled open the heavy glass door as the *maître d'* looked up from his leather reservations book. "I'm meeting my fiancé," she panted.

Nellie scanned the dining area, then saw Richard rising from his seat at a corner table. A few fine lines framed his eyes, and at his temples strands of silver were woven through his dark hair. He looked her up and down and gave her a playful wink. She wondered if she'd ever stop feeling a flutter in her stomach at the sight of him.

"Sorry," she said as she approached. He kissed her as he pulled out her chair, and she breathed in his clean citrus scent.

"Everything okay?"

Anyone else would've asked almost as a formality. But Richard's gaze stayed fixed on her; Nellie knew he truly cared about her answer.

"Crazy day." Nellie sat down with a sigh. "Parent conferences.

When we're on the other side of that table for Richard Junior, remind me to say thank you to the teachers."

She smoothed her skirt over her legs as Richard reached for the bottle of Verdicchio cooling on ice in a bucket. On the table, a votive candle burned low, casting a golden circle on the heavy cream-colored tablecloth.

"Just half a glass for me. I had a quick drink with the other teachers after the conferences. Linda treated; she said it was our combat pay."

Richard frowned. "Wish I'd known. I wouldn't have ordered a bottle." He motioned to the waiter, a subtle gesture with his index finger, and requested a San Pellegrino. "You sometimes get a headache when you drink during the day."

She smiled. It was one of the first things she'd ever told him.

She'd been sitting next to a soldier on a flight from South Florida after visiting her mother. She'd moved to Manhattan for a fresh start immediately after graduating from college. If her mom didn't still live in Nellie's hometown, she'd never return.

Before the plane took off, the attendant had approached. "There's a gentleman in first class who would like to offer you his seat," she'd told the young soldier, who stood up and said, "Awesome!"

Then Richard had walked down the aisle. The knot of his tie was loosened, as if he'd had a long day. He held a drink and a leather briefcase. Those eyes had met Nellie's and he'd flashed a warm smile.

"That was really nice of you."

"No big deal," Richard said as he settled down beside her.

Then the safety announcements began. A few moments later the plane lurched upward.

Nellie gripped the armrest as they bounced through an air pocket.

Richard's deep voice, close to her ear, surprised her: "It's just like when your car goes over a pothole. It's perfectly safe."

"I know that logically."

"But it doesn't help. Maybe this will."

He passed her his glass and she noticed his ring finger was bare. She hesitated. "I sometimes get a headache when I drink during the day."

The plane rumbled, and she took a big gulp.

“Finish it. I’ll order another . . . or maybe you’d prefer a glass of wine?” He raised his eyebrows questioningly, and she noticed the crescent-shaped silver scar by his right temple.

She nodded. “Thank you.” Never before had a seatmate tried to comfort her on a flight; usually people looked away or flipped through a magazine while she fought through her panic alone.

“I get it, you know,” he said. “I have this thing about the sight of blood.”

“You do?” The plane shuddered slightly, the wings tipping to the left. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

“I’ll tell you about it, but you have to promise not to lose respect for me.”

She nodded again, not wanting his soothing voice to stop.

“So a few years ago one of my colleagues passed out and hit his head on the edge of a conference table in the middle of a meeting. . . . I guess he had low blood pressure. Either that or the meeting bored him into a coma.”

Nellie opened her eyes and released a little laugh. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d done that on an airplane.

“I tell everyone to step back and I grab a chair and help the guy into it. I was yelling for someone to get water when I see all this blood. And all of a sudden I start getting light-headed, like I’m going to faint, too. I practically kick the injured guy out of the chair so I can sit down, and suddenly everyone is ignoring him and trying to help me.”

The plane leveled off. A soft chime sounded, and a flight attendant walked down the aisle, offering headphones. Nellie let go of the armrest and looked at Richard. He was grinning at her.

“You survived, we’re through the clouds. It should be pretty smooth from here on out.”

“Thank you. For the drink and the story . . . You get to keep your man card, even with the fainting.”

Two hours later, Richard had told Nellie about his job as a hedge fund manager and revealed he had a soft spot for teachers ever since one had helped him learn to pronounce his *R*’s: “It’s because of her that I didn’t introduce myself to you as Wichawd.” When she asked

him if he had family in New York, he shook his head. "Just an older sister who lives in Boston. My parents died years ago." He bridged his hands and looked down at them. "A car accident."

"My father passed away, too." He glanced back over at her. "I have this old sweater of his. . . . I still wear it sometimes."

They were both silent for a beat, then the flight attendant instructed the passengers to close their tray tables and tilt their seats fully upright.

"Are you okay with landings?"

"Maybe you can tell me another story to get me through it," Nelly said.

"Hmmm. Can't think of one off the top of my head. Why don't you give me your number in case one comes to me?"

He handed her a pen from his suit pocket, and she tilted her head to jot it down on a napkin, her long blond hair falling forward in front of her shoulders.

Richard reached out and gently ran his fingers down the length of it before tucking it back behind her ear. "So beautiful. Don't ever cut it."

## CHAPTER FOUR

I SIT ON THE FLOOR of the dressing room, the lingering perfume of roses reminding me of a wedding. My replacement will be a beautiful bride. I imagine her gazing up at Richard, promising to love and honor him, just as I did.

I can almost hear her voice.

I know how she sounds. I call her sometimes, but I use a burner phone with a blocked number.

“Hi,” her message begins. Her tone is carefree, bright. “I’m sorry I missed you!”

Is she truly sorry? Or is she triumphant? Her relationship with Richard is now public, though it began when he and I were still married. We had problems. Don’t all couples, after the glow of the honeymoon fades? Still, I never expected him to tell me to move out so quickly. To erase the tracks of our relationship.

It’s as though he wants to pretend we were never married at all. As if I don’t exist.

Does she ever think about me and feel guilty for what she did?

Those questions batter me every night. Sometimes, when I’ve lain awake for hours, the sheets twisted around me, I shut my eyes, so close to finally succumbing to sleep, and then her face leaps into my mind.

I sit bolt upright, fumbling for the pills in my nightstand drawer. I chew one instead of swallowing so it takes effect faster.

Her voice-mail greeting gives me no clues about her feelings.

But when I watched her one night with Richard, she looked incandescent.

I'd been walking to our favorite restaurant on the Upper East Side. A self-help book had recommended that I visit painful places from my past, to release their power over me and reclaim the city as my own. So I trekked to the café where Richard and I had sipped lattes and shared the Sunday *New York Times*, and I wandered past Richard's office, where his company held a lavish holiday party every December, and passed through the magnolia and lilac trees in Central Park. I felt worse with every step. It was a horrible idea; no wonder that book was languishing on the discount rack.

Still, I'd pressed on, planning to round out my tour with a drink at the restaurant bar where Richard and I had celebrated our last few anniversaries. That was when I saw them.

Maybe he was trying to reclaim the spot, too.

If I'd been walking just a bit faster, we would have reached the entrance at almost the same moment. Instead I ducked into a storefront and peered around the edge. I caught a glimpse of tanned legs, seductive curves, and the quick smile she flashed at Richard as he opened the door for her.

Naturally my husband wanted her. What man wouldn't? She was as delectable as a ripe peach.

I crept closer and stared through the floor-to-ceiling window as Richard ordered his girlfriend a drink—she had champagne tastes, it seemed—and she sipped the golden liquid from a slim flute.

I couldn't let Richard see me; he wouldn't believe it was a coincidence. I'd followed him before, of course. Or rather, I'd followed them.

Yet my feet refused to move. I greedily drank her in as she crossed her legs so the slit in her dress revealed her thigh.

He was pressed close to her, leaning down as his arm curved over the back of her stool. His hair was longer, brushing the collar of his

suit in the back; it suited him. He had the same leonine expression I'd come to recognize when he closed a big business deal, one he'd been pursuing for months.

She tossed back her head and laughed at something he said.

My nails dug into my palms; I'd never been in love with anyone before Richard. At that moment I realized I'd never hated anyone, either.

"Vanessa?"

The voice outside the dressing-room door jars me out of the memory. The British accent belongs to my boss, Lucille, a woman not known for her patience.

I run my fingers under my eyes, aware mascara is probably pooled there. "Just straightening up." My voice has grown husky.

"A customer needs help in Stella McCartney. Sort out the room later."

She is waiting for me to emerge. There is no time to fix my face, to erase the messy signs of grief, and besides, my purse is in the employees' lounge.

I open the door and she takes a step back. "Are you unwell?" Her perfectly arched eyebrows lift.

I seize the opportunity. "I'm not sure. I just . . . I feel a little nauseous. . . ."

"Can you finish the day?" Lucille's tone holds no sympathy, and I wonder if this transgression will be my last. She answers before I can: "No, you might be contagious. You should leave."

I nod and hurry to grab my bag. I don't want her to change her mind.

I take the escalators to the main floor and watch pieces of my ravaged reflection flash in the mirrors I ride past.

*Richard is engaged*, my mind whispers.

I hurry out the employees' exit, barely pausing for the guard to search my purse, and lean back against the side of the store to slip on my sneakers. I consider a taxi, but what Hillary said is true. Richard got our house in Westchester and the Manhattan apartment he'd kept from his bachelor days, the one he slept in on nights when he had late



meetings. The one where he hosted her. He got the cars, the stocks, the savings. I didn't even put up a fight. I'd entered the marriage with nothing. I hadn't worked. I hadn't borne him children. I'd been deceitful.

I hadn't been a good wife.

Now, though, I wonder why I accepted the small lump-sum payment Richard offered me. His new bride will set the table with china I selected. She'll nestle close to him on the suede couch I chose. She'll sit beside him, her hand on his leg, laughing her throaty laugh as he shifts into fourth gear in our Mercedes.

A bus lumbers past and spews hot exhaust. The gray plume seems to settle around me. I push away from the building and walk up Fifth Avenue. A pair of women carrying large shopping bags nearly crowd me off the sidewalk. A businessman strides past, cell phone pressed to his ear, his expression intent. I cross the street and a biker whips by, just inches away. He yells something in his wake.

The city is tightening around me; I need space. I cross Fifty-ninth Street and enter Central Park.

A little girl with pigtails marvels at a balloon animal tied to her wrist, and I stare after her. She could have been mine. If I'd been able to get pregnant, I might still be with Richard. He might not have wanted me to leave. We could be coming here to meet Daddy for lunch.

I'm gasping. I unfold my arms from across my stomach and straighten up. I keep my eyes fixed ahead as I walk north. I focus on the steady rhythm of my sneakers hitting the pavement, counting each step, setting small goals. A hundred steps. Now a hundred more.

At last I exit the park at Eighty-sixth Street and Central Park West and turn toward Aunt Charlotte's apartment. I crave sleep, oblivion. Only six pills are left, and the last time I asked my doctor for a refill, she hesitated.

"You don't want to become dependent upon these," she said. "Try to get some exercise every day and avoid caffeine after noon. Take a warm bath before bed, and see if that does the trick."

But those are remedies for garden-variety insomnia. They don't help me.

I'm almost at the apartment when I realize I've forgotten Aunt Charlotte's wine. I know I won't want to go back out, so I turn and retrace my steps a block, to the liquor store. Four red and two white, Aunt Charlotte had requested. I take a basket and fill it with Merlot and Chardonnay.

My hands close around the smooth, heavy bottles. I haven't tasted wine since the day Richard asked me to go, but I still crave the velvety fruit awakening my tongue. I hesitate, then add a seventh and eighth bottle to my basket. The handles dig into my forearms as I make my way to the cash register.

The young man behind the counter rings them up without comment. Maybe he's used to disheveled women in designer clothes coming in here in the middle of the day to stock up on wine. I used to have it delivered to the house I shared with Richard, at least until he asked me to stop drinking. Then I drove to a gourmet market a half hour away so I wouldn't run into anyone we knew. On recycling day, I took early-morning walks and slipped the empty bottles into neighbors' bins.

"That all?" the guy asks.

"Yes." I reach for my debit card, knowing that if I'd gone for expensive wines rather than fifteen-dollar bottles, the charge wouldn't have cleared my checking account.

He packs the bottles four to a bag, and I push the door open with my shoulder and head for Aunt Charlotte's, the reassuring heft pulling down my arms. I reach our building and wait for the arthritic elevator's doors to creak open. The journey up twelve flights takes an eternity; my mind is consumed with the thought of the first mouthful sliding down my throat, warming my stomach. Blunting the edges of my pain.

Luckily my aunt isn't home. I check the calendar hanging by the refrigerator and see the words *D-three p.m.* Probably a friend she's meeting for tea; her husband, Beau, a journalist, passed away suddenly after a heart attack years ago. He was the love of her life. As far as I know, she hasn't dated anyone seriously since. I set the bags on the counter

and uncork the Merlot. I reach for a goblet, then replace it and grab a coffee mug instead. I fill it halfway, and then, unable to wait a moment longer, I raise it to my lips and the rich cherry flavor caresses my mouth. Closing my eyes, I swallow and feel it trickle down my throat. Some of the tightness slowly eases out of my body. I'm not sure how long Aunt Charlotte will be gone, so I pour more into my mug and take it and my bottles into my bedroom.

I slip off my dress, leaving it crumpled on the floor, and step over it. Then I bend down to pick it up and place it on a hanger. I pull on a soft gray T-shirt and fleecy sweatpants and climb into bed. Aunt Charlotte moved a small television into the room when I first arrived, but I rarely use it. Now, however, I'm desperate for companionship, even of the electronic variety. I reach for the remote and flip through channels until I land on a talk show. I cup my mug in my hands and take another long drink.

I try to lose myself in the drama being played out on-screen, but the topic of the day is infidelity.

"It can make a marriage stronger," insists a middle-aged woman who is holding the hand of a man seated beside her. He shifts in his seat and looks down at the floor.

*It can also destroy it, I think.*

I stare at the man. *Who was she? I wonder. How did you meet her? On a business trip, or maybe in line for a sandwich at the deli? What was it about her that drew you in, that compelled you to cross that devastating line?*

I'm clutching my mug so tightly my hand aches. I want to hurl it at the screen, but instead, I refill it.

The man crosses his legs at the ankle, then straightens them. He clears his throat and scratches his head. I'm glad he's uncomfortable. He's beefy and thuggish-looking; not my type, but I can see how he'd appeal to other women.

"Regaining trust is a long process, but if both parties are committed to it, it's very possible," says a woman identified as a couples therapist on the screen below her image.

The drab-looking wife is babbling on about how they've rebuilt

trust completely, how their marriage is now their priority, how they lost each other but have found each other again. She sounds as if she's been reading Hallmark cards.

Then the therapist looks at the husband. "Do you agree trust has been reestablished?"

He shrugs. *Jerk*, I think, wondering how he got caught. "I'm workin' on it. But it's hard. I keep picturing her with that—" A beep cuts off his last word.

So I got it wrong. I thought he was the cheater. The clues were present, but I misread them. Not for the first time.

I bang the mug against my front teeth when I go to sip more Merlot. I slide down lower in bed, wishing I'd left the television off.

What separates a fling from a marriage proposal? I thought Richard was just having some fun. I expected their affair to blaze hot and extinguish itself quickly. I pretended not to know, to look the other way. Besides, who could blame Richard? I wasn't the woman he'd married nearly a decade ago. I'd gained weight, I rarely left the house, and I'd begun to search for hidden meanings in Richard's actions, seizing upon clues that I thought indicated he was tiring of me.

She is everything Richard desires. Everything I used to be.

Right after the brief, almost clinical scene that officially ended our seven-year marriage, Richard put our house in Westchester on the market and moved into his city apartment. But he loved our quiet neighborhood, the privacy it afforded. He'll probably buy another place in the suburbs for his new bride. I wonder if she plans to quit work and devote herself to Richard, to trying to become pregnant, just as I did.

I can't believe I have any tears remaining, but more slide down my cheeks as I refill my mug again. The bottle is nearly empty and I spill a few drops on my white sheets. They stand out like blood.

A familiar haze settles around me, the embrace of an old friend. I experience the sensation of blurring into the mattress. Maybe this is how my mother felt when she had her lights-out days. I wish I'd understood better back then; I felt abandoned, but now I know some pain is too fierce to battle. You can only duck for cover and hope the sand-

storm passes. It's too late for me to tell her, though. Both of my parents are gone.

"Vanessa?" I hear a gentle knock against my bedroom door and Aunt Charlotte enters. Behind her thick glasses, her hazel eyes look magnified. "I thought I heard the television."

"I got sick at work. You probably shouldn't come any closer." The two bottles are on my nightstand. I hope the lamp is blocking them.

"Can I get you anything?"

"Some water would be great," I say, slurring the *s* slightly. I need to get her out of my room quickly.

She leaves the door ajar as she walks toward the kitchen and I pull myself out of bed, grabbing the bottles and wincing as they clink together. I hurry to my armoire and place them on the floor, righting one when it nearly topples over.

I'm back in the same position when Aunt Charlotte returns with a tray.

"I brought some saltines and herbal tea, too." The kindness in her voice ties a knot in my chest. She places the tray by the foot of my bed, then turns to leave.

I hope she can't smell the alcohol on my breath. "I left the wine in the kitchen for you."

"Thank you, honey. Call if you need anything."

I drop my head back to the pillow as the door closes, feeling dizziness engulf me. Six pills are left. . . . If I let one of the bitter white tablets dissolve on my tongue, I could probably sleep through until morning.

But suddenly I have a better idea. The thought shears through the fog in my mind: *They've only just gotten engaged. It isn't too late yet!*

I fumble for my bag and grab my phone. Richard's numbers are still programmed in. His cell rings twice, then I hear his voice. Its timbre belongs to a bigger, taller man than my ex-husband, a juxtaposition I always found intriguing. "I'll get right back to you," his recorded message promises. Richard always, always keeps his promises.

"Richard," I blurt out. "It's me. I heard about your engagement, and I just need to talk to you. . . ."

The clarity I felt a moment ago wiggles away like a fish through my fingertips. I struggle to grasp the right words.

“Please phone me back. . . . It’s really important.”

My voice breaks on the last word and I press *End Call*.

I hold the phone to my chest and close my eyes. Maybe I could have avoided the regret ravaging my body if only I’d tried harder to see the warning signs. To *fix* things. It can’t be too late. I can’t bear the thought of Richard marrying again.

I must have dozed off because an hour later, when my cell vibrates, it jolts me. I look down to see a text:

*I’m sorry, but there’s nothing more to say. Take care. R.*

At that moment a realization seizes me. If Richard had moved on with another woman, I might be able to eventually patch together a life for myself. I could stay with Aunt Charlotte until I’d saved enough to rent my own place. Or I could move to a different city, one with no reminders. I could adopt a pet. Maybe, in time, when I saw a dark-haired businessman in a well-cut suit turning a corner, the sun gleaming off his aviator shades, I wouldn’t feel my heart stutter before I realized it wasn’t him.

But as long as he is with her—the woman who blithely stepped up to become the new Mrs. Richard Thompson while I pretended to be oblivious—I will never have peace.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE WIFE BETWEEN US. Copyright © 2018 by Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

[www.stmartins.com](http://www.stmartins.com)

Designed by Steven Seighman

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data (TK)

ISBN 978-1-250-13092-1 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-250-13093-8 (ebook)

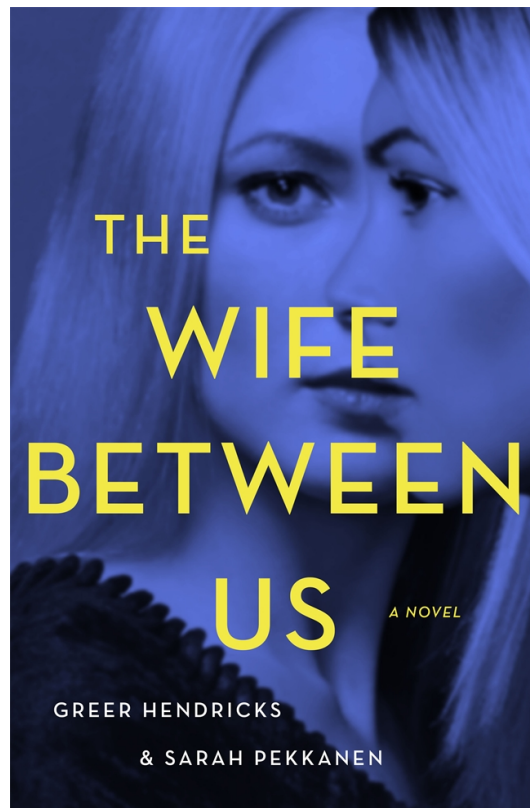
ISBN 978-1-250-19251-6 (sampler)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email at [MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com).

First Edition: January 2018

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

When you read this book, you will make many assumptions. You will assume you are reading about a jealous wife and her obsession with her replacement. You will assume you are reading about a woman about to enter a new marriage with the man she loves. You will assume the first wife was a disaster and that the husband was well rid of her. You will assume you know the motives, the history, the anatomy of the relationships.  
**Assume nothing.**



**Pre-order your copy of THE WIFE BETWEEN US,  
on sale January 9, 2018:**

<https://us.macmillan.com/static/smp/wife-between-us/>