



NOT EVERY HOME IS A

# HAVEN

MIA DALIA

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M I A D A L I A



CamCat Publishing, LLC  
Fort Collins, Colorado 80524  
camcatpublishing.com

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Hardcover ISBN 9780744311341  
Paperback ISBN 9780744311754  
Large-Print Paperback ISBN 9780744311778  
eBook ISBN 9780744311761  
Audiobook ISBN 9780744311433

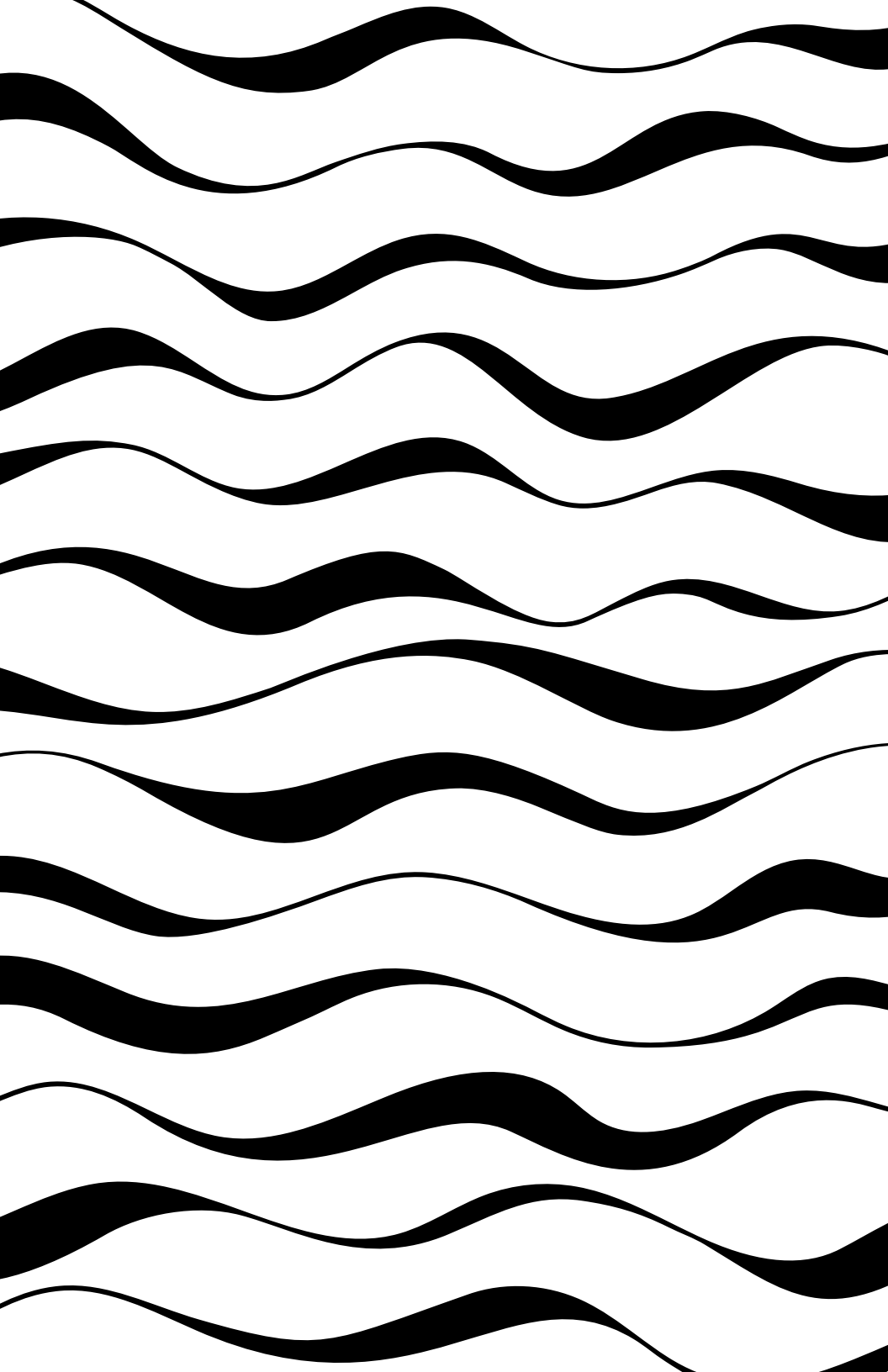
Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data available upon request

Book and cover design by Maryann Appel  
Interior artwork by Md Saidur Rahman, Memories, Seamartini

5 3 1 2 4

TO CHELSEA,  
UNTIL THE END OF THE WORLD.





“The past is never dead. It’s not even the past.”

—William Faulkner

## P R O L O G U E

*Once upon a time . . .*

*But no, of course not. Too many stories have begun that way, and this was no fairy tale, even though it might have been easier to think of it as one. A fairy tale with ogres and princesses. How lovely.*

*How wrong.*

*A life so meticulously structured around the present can become easily overwhelmed by the past rushing in. All it takes is one careless glance back. Those are dangerous. Just ask Orpheus.*

*All this free time can be dangerous too, making one nostalgic, retrospective. Looking back, looking forward, the pages of the book of time turn.*





1



# JEFF

**D**RIVE, DRIVE, DRIVE until the road is done with you. Until it spits out the final destination at you like some kind of begrudging reward. Until you're through. That's the deal.

The summer morning is unseasonably autumnal, as crisp as a freshly starched shirt. The leaves are looking festive, though it is much too early for them to change colors. Maybe they are gearing up for the months to come, putting on a dress rehearsal. In theory, at least, the leaves are meant to make up for the miserable New England winter that inevitably follows their departure.

Jeff Baker tries to enjoy nature, and when that fails, he focuses on the road itself—the way it disappears beneath the wheels of their five-year-old forest-green Subaru. It's soothing in a way, the certainty of the motion, the steady progress forward. North.

There used to be a time when Jeff loved driving; a time that by now is but a vague, faded memory. His first car was a beat-up '87 Mustang, produced decades after that pony was at its prime, and the two of them

were inseparable. The AC never worked, so the windows were rolled down for as long as the weather permitted, the wind blowing through his hair like freedom, like youth itself.

It seems that ever since then, his vehicle selections have been increasingly less exciting, more sedate, staid. Practical. Now here he is, behind the wheel of a car that positively announces to the world that a liberal-minded, environmentally conscious family is inside it. A cliché if there was ever one.

Jeff knows that it suits the man he is today: a husband, a father, someone with a stalled but reasonably lucrative middle management job; a man with a softening gut and receding hairline, wading knee-deep into the still, murky waters of middle age.

He sighs, adjusts the rearview mirror, and tries valiantly to ignore the kicking at the back of his seat. When that doesn't work, he snaps, abruptly and frustratedly.

"JJ, how many times have I told you not to do that?"

Jeff can feel his son's insolent shrug without turning around to see it. It's one of JJ's signature moves—the kid is the personification of a sullen, surly teen. Although they share a name and Jeff loves the kid, he recognizes nothing of himself in Jeff Jr.

His son is lazy, aimless, slovenly in a way that physically upsets fastidious Jeff. What's worse is that the kid doesn't seem to be clever or interesting or even funny. He gets by in school with barely passing grades, participates in no sports or extracurriculars, and spends most of his free time glued to one screen or another. The video games he plays seem too violent to Jeff, but he can't figure out a way to ban them outright, because: (a) he doesn't want to be that dad, and (b) he doesn't necessarily believe in the connection between on-screen and real-life violence. After all, violence has been around long before video games were even invented.

Still, it's difficult to think of a bigger waste of time than these stupid games. At least the kid wears headphones to play them. The constant

*rat-tat-tat* of guns in the background would have driven Jeff crazy by now. Jessie is sitting next to her brother, occupying, it seems, only half of her seat. Wherein her brother's girth is forever expanding, Jessie appears to be shrinking. It makes her brittle, Jeff thinks, in appearance and temperament. So much like her mother.

The two kids are only a couple of years apart, but you'd never guess they were related. Never guess they came from the same house, the same people. There is a lot of nature vs. nurture baggage there that Jeff doesn't care to unpack.

His daughter is unfathomable to him; the way she talks in text message abbreviations, the eager manner in which she subscribes to the latest trends without ever taking a moment to examine them for herself, how appearance-conscious she is.

This isn't a great time to be a kid. There's a steady bombardment of social media disseminating shallow values, unchecked materialism, and flat-out lies.

He doesn't even know what wave of feminism everyone's supposed to be riding now. Jenna might, but he loathes to ask. She wouldn't just answer, there'd be a lecture. Jeff despises being lectured and tends to avoid long-winded debates. He likes simple things, short, clear-cut explanations, yes-or-no answers whenever applicable.

Jenna is doing her nails next to him; *screech-screech* goes the thin emery board—a sound Jeff can feel in his vertebrae. He hates it, hates the way he has to just sit next to her and inhale the dead nail particles she's sending into the air, but asking her to stop would be as futile as expecting JJ to stop kicking the freaking seat.

Jeff likes to think of himself as a man who picks his battles. And there have been some. Over the years, that number has dwindled. Lately, he doesn't know if it's just something he tells himself to cover the fact that he has, slowly and inexorably, become a pushover.

Jenna is thin like their daughter, all gym-tight muscles and yoga-flexible tendons. She has been dying her hair the same shade of blond for

so long that sometimes Jeff is surprised to see her natural light brown color in the old photos. She looks good, younger than her years, certainly younger than Jeff.

If he doesn't tell her that enough, it's only because they don't talk that much anymore in general. Or maybe it's because her undeniable physical attractiveness appears to have lost the sunny warmth, easy charm, and shy sexiness of the Jenna he fell in love with so long ago. It's almost like his wife has Stepforded herself, trading in all the delightful aspects of her character, all of her fun quirky self for a perfect surface appeal.

Is that what two decades of marriage do? Or living in a society obsessed with youth and beauty? Or being a mother? Or—a more somberly horrifying thought—is that what living with Jeff for twenty years does?

Jeff wants to hit the rewind button and watch their lives again, in slow motion, noting every salient plot point, every crucial twist and turn, to understand how they got here. But it doesn't work that way, does it?

From one of his more interesting but ultimately useless college courses, Jeff remembers a quote: "Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward." It's one of those sayings that sounds smart unless you really think about it, because once you do, you'll see that the former part of it is ultimately useless, while the latter is simply unavoidable.

Jeff had a good time in college. He did well in high school too: just smart enough, just fun enough, just inoffensive enough to ensure certain easy popularity that enabled smooth sailing amid the various social cliques and characters. After graduating, out in the real world, his stock began to slowly but definitely tank. He could never quite figure out why; perhaps, something about the absence of predetermined social structure, or increased expectations.

Either way, by the time Jenna came along, he grabbed onto her like a life preserver and held on steadily and faithfully ever since.

He had never done well on his own when he was young, found solitude oppressive. Depressing, even. Now, of course, he'd kill for some, but it is much too late. Even his man cave occupies only a corner of the basement at home, sharing the rest of the space with laundry and storage and the moody boiler, and thus is perpetually loud and nowhere near private.

He likely isn't going to get much peace and quiet for the next month either, but he agreed to go anyway.

After all, one simply doesn't say no to a free vacation.

And sure, as he pointed out to Jenna while they were making plans, it wasn't entirely free: there was the cost of gas, tolls, food, etc., but the main expense, the house, was taken care of, and so here they are now, driving, driving north.

"Are we there yet?" JJ pipes up from the back seat, too loudly because of the headphones he rarely takes off.

It was funny the first few times—no, not really—but now it grates on Jeff. He forces a smile. "Almost," he replies with false cheer.

The truth is, everything around here looks exactly the same to him: the same tall trees, the same tiny weather-beaten towns, the same road signs. If not for the chatty GPS, he would be hopelessly lost. He wants to thank his digital navigator every time she points out a turn amid a number of interchangeable ones; she seems to be the only helpful person around.

Though, of course, she isn't even a person.

Jenna is listening to an audiobook. Without even asking, Jeff knows it's one of those domestic thrillers she loves that really ought to be shelved under women's fiction.

Something about scrappy heroines untangling their husbands' dark secrets. He tried a couple out of curiosity some time ago at Jenna's prompting and found them unoriginal, uninteresting, and blandly indistinguishable from one another. When Jenna asked for his honest opinion, he gave it to her, like a fool. They never spoke of books again.

He shouldn't have said anything; he certainly shouldn't have added that it was still a step up from her normal self-help fare.

Jeff returned to his historical tomes, fictional and otherwise, spicing it up occasionally with a science fiction novel. Though lately, the sci-fi has been garbage; he hates all the space operas, all the sociopolitical messages overriding the plots. To him, the genre has always been progressive, subversive, and thought-provoking. He doesn't know why it needs to try so hard now.

He tried giving some of his old books to his son, only to find them unread, languishing amid the piles of trash obscuring the floor of JJ's room. Watching movies together proved equally futile. Jeff cannot force himself to sit through the mindless violent crap his kid enjoys. And if he has to see another freaking superhero movie . . .

Jeff doesn't know what his daughter is listening to, but it's likely the latest in pop music. Of all his family, Jessie is the most mysterious one to him. Almost a complete stranger, with his wife's features and his surname. He loves her just as he loves JJ, but the kids remain baffling.

They are supposed to be a team. That was presumably the grand idea about the obnoxious cutesiness of giving their kids J names.

"We'll all be a J. Baker," Jenna told him at the time, back when he still found her enthusiasm, if not all of her ideas, adorable, and here they were. A family with interchangeable initials. Like they were the sort to embroider them on sheets and towels.

Like it mattered.

Jeff is the only one listening to the radio. Never politics—after the last election, he had stopped following them entirely. Now that there is another one coming up, it's difficult to care or remain hopeful. A new decade is looming ahead.

The 2020s have an apocalyptic feel to Jeff. He sticks with music. The station he played while driving out of the city had faded into static miles ago, and now he's stuck with some local DJ inexpertly mixing '80s and '90s hits, plying the nostalgia factor.

And hey, it's working. Jeff remembers these songs. Remembers singing along to them, driving to them, drinking to them, making out to them. Sometimes he even sings along, but quietly. If his voice gets louder, he gets a kick in his seat, which may be unintentional but feels like an unspoken criticism.

He wishes he didn't save up his vacation days so diligently. He wishes they weren't set to expire due to the new company policy so that splurging them all on a month-long vacation was his best option. He wishes Jenna didn't have to inherit access to this supposedly amazing lake house within driving distance that's simply too good to pass up.

The house was never mentioned to him before, but then again, neither was Jenna's aunt, Gussie. Or maybe she was, and Jeff forgot? Would he forget a name like Gussie?

From what he gathers, the childless, eccentric aunt left the house to her entire extended family to delight in on a timeshare basis, and Jenna finagled a month just for them.

They haven't had a vacation in a while, and never one this long. Jeff faked excitement at the idea the way he felt he was supposed to, but his actual reaction was closer to the eye rolling the kids gave when Jenna made the announcement. At the time, he thought it was going to be trying and likely tedious. He still thinks so, but he went along with every step of the plan, and now they are almost there and it's much too late to change a thing.

Maybe it will be relaxing, he tells himself without much conviction. Maybe the house will be larger than their small townhouse or have better soundproofing. Maybe he'll finally be able to finish the Nero biography he started months ago.

The voice of experience pipes through, laughing at the tentative hopefulness of Jeff's maybes. Jeff sighs and focuses on driving. "Sunglasses at Night" plays on the radio, and he sings along under his breath. "Don't switch a blade on a guy in shades, oh no . . ."

A kick in the back of his seat follows as swiftly as a slap.





# JENNA



IT'S SUCH A beautiful drive. Such a scenic one. Jenna wishes the kids would unglue themselves from their phones and enjoy it. Some days she feels like she can't remember the last time she established meaningful eye contact with either of them. She knows they are just teenagers being teenagers, but then she remembers herself at that age, and she wasn't like that. Or was she?

Memory is tricky. Jenna once read in a self-help book that it rewrites itself ever so slightly every time we reach for it. What a concept. It unsettles her, makes her feel like she's been lying to herself, like parts of her life have been a lie. But no, she knows better.

She can trace every path that led her here, to this car, sitting next to a balding, somewhat overweight version of a man she married twenty years ago with two distracted teens behind her. For the most part, Jenna is pleased with her choices.

Or at least she tells herself often enough so that it comes to constitute the foundation upon which her life is built.

When Jenna reaches back into her memory box, it provides her with a picture of a shy brown-haired girl who was pretty good at a variety of things and great at none. She had nice but unexciting friends and nice but unexciting boyfriends. An English degree from a middling small college because she couldn't think of something she was passionate about. A decent and supportive family with entirely too many people in it to genuinely know and adore anyone individually, though it lent itself easily to a sort of warm, if much too general, connection to all of them.

Her father was one of nine. The Doyles are a proper brood of tow-headed New Englanders, with open, honest faces, ruddy cheeks, and large, trustworthy hands. All boys and one girl, the elusive Aunt Gussie.

Augusta at birth, but that never took.

The boys of the clan all went on to have solid, if unremarkable, middle-class lives as CPAs, bank workers, and project managers, but Aunt Gussie was the adventurous one.

At some point in her adventures, she managed to displease the family to such an extent that they spent the remaining decades of their respective lives pretending she never existed at all.

Though her family was generally chatty and forthcoming, Jenna was never able to find out what grand transgression Aunt Gussie was guilty of. She was barely, if ever, mentioned. The ultimate persona non grata, a taboo.

The woman spent most of her later life in Europe, so Jenna had no direct recollections of her. They'd never met.

In the few early family photos that featured Gussie, she looked fierce and determined, sharp jutting chin pointing directly at the camera, something like a smirk playing on her lips. A character, for sure.

Jenna wishes she got to know her aunt, but it is too late for that now. She did find it distasteful the way her family pounced on Gussie's inheritance. She had never seen them display such naked greed until then.

How the woman managed to accumulate her wealth no one really knew—unless they knew and weren't saying—but each of her brothers got a precise amount of thirty dollars and each of their children a princely sum of ten grand and a share in a vacation house upstate.

Jenna had seen the photos her cousins took of their time there; it looked idyllic. A place sprawling enough to qualify as an estate, it even had its own name like the houses in books, Haven, though everyone always referred to it simply as Gussie's.

Vacationing there was known as “going up to Gussie's.” It was like suddenly, after decades of exile, her aunt had become a proper family fixture once again. Apparently, the proverbial absence did create fondness in certain cases.

Jenna had meant to go for a while, but it seemed like something was always getting in the way. She sensed her husband's reluctance and her kids' ambivalence, but eventually, she simply made a choice to ignore it.

It was her time to attend to her needs, and everyone else was just going to have to put up and shut up. She didn't read all those self-help books for nothing.

Jenna was proud to establish her agency, proud to be in control. She made all the plans, worked out the timing with her family, checked out the area for family-friendly activities, all that.

If only the heroine in the book she's listening to had similar self-possession, but no, the simpering imbecile is kowtowing to her brute of a husband and practically asking to be murdered in some elaborate and mysterious way.

Jenna has the book all figured out, and she's barely halfway through, but she continues to listen because she likes the plucky voice of the audio narrator, and she enjoys the feeling of superiority the story gives her.

They are all the same, these thrillers she borrows at the library through the app she figured out all by herself, thank you. The women in

the books are either victims, which makes Jenna feel great about herself, or they are heroes fighting back, which gives Jenna a vicarious thrill of relatability.

She too, she thinks, is a protagonist of her own story. Sure, her story isn't all that interesting and certainly not book-worthy, but maybe one day. She'll be ready.

At that thought, she pats her husband's doughy thigh and elicits an uncertain small smile from him. It pleases her how easy it is to make Jeff happy. It's such a wonderful quality in a spouse.

Her hands look good, she nods approvingly to herself—she did a good job on her nails. For the longest time she kept them mommy-short; now they are in longer, sexy predator mode.

She wonders if Jeff notices. She hopes he does.

Jenna remembers the young man she married, because he was decent and nice and—if she's completely honest with herself—the first one to ask.

At that time in her life, she was a tiny fish in a giant pond of the city's publishing industry, watching her friends marry and move away. Burned out on passion but still craving companionship, Jenna eventually came to recognize and appreciate decency and niceness as attractive qualities in a partner.

Jeff didn't so much sweep her off her feet as steadied her by the elbow. She told herself it was enough.

The thing is, it's still, mostly, enough. Jeff is still nice and decent. And not imaginative enough to have ever cheated. The thought elicits a small, confused pride.

Sure, they often talk at cross-purposes, and sure, their sex life has dwindled to special occasions, but they are still a solid team. They are raising nice, decent kids.

Or at least, she thinks they are. It's difficult to tell. Her kids are a mystery. At least Jessie looks like her. Who is JJ supposed to look like, exactly?

Both of them have the strangest relationships with food. Jessie is always dieting, washing down apples with coffee, and snacking on hold-the-peanut-butter celery stalks.

JJ eats like a zombie freshly released into a crowded mall. No food is safe around him. Her son's size bewilders Jenna, though she'd never let it show. JJ is too old to pass for something cutesy like husky, and the kid smells too. Like stale sweat, unwashed hair, and dirty socks. Jenna wishes Jeff would talk to him about it.

Jessie, on the other hand, spends way too much time watching on-line tutorials and following instructions carefully for just-so hair and just-right makeup. It makes her look simultaneously too old and too young for her years, like those toddlers dressed up to compete in pageants.

The last time Jenna attempted to have a heart-to-heart with her daughter, it crashed and burned on the topic of safe sex. Jenna comforts herself with the knowledge of having done her best; she isn't ready to be a grandma.

Some of her cousins seem to have perfectly happy well-adjusted children, and she quietly resents them for it. It isn't like she didn't have the time.

Jenna stopped working—slightly reluctant but mostly, overwhelmingly, relieved—after Jessie was born, and since then, never found the right time to go back.

Once the kids reached the age when they didn't need full-time mothering, it was nearly impossible to reenter the workforce. Too many blank years on her resume. The business had changed too much. Etc., etc.

She turned her energy to housekeeping and working out instead, with pride and dedication any career woman might appreciate. And it shows, she's certain of it.

Their house is the cleanest, most organized one she's been in; and she is in the best shape of her life, looking fitter and more attractive than any of the women her age she knows.

Jeff may not appreciate it, but those women do. She knows they do. Women are like that, no matter what they say, competitive to a fault.

It gives Jenna a thrill to be compared and found superior. It's what drives her to push herself at the gym, walking, running, pedaling. It's what motivates her sweaty uncomfortable yoga sessions. Jenna is being her best self. The rest can just fall in line around her.

She notices JJ kicking the back of his father's seat and contemplates saying something, but then again, that ought to be on Jeff.

For the longest time, her husband, never much of a disciplinarian, was content playing the good cop. When that appeared to zap too much energy, he became a content listen-to-your-mother second fiddle. Now he seems to have just given up altogether. He'll say something but never with any feeling behind it. No wonder the kids don't listen.

She reminds herself that he's busy, that he's working, but it annoys her still. To shoulder the majority of parenting means to also shoulder the responsibility for the majority of parenting mistakes. Jenna hates being wrong.

She was wrong to suggest music lessons for either of her tone-deaf offspring. Wrong to push JJ into sports. Wrong to ever discuss weight and fitness with Jessie.

But she isn't wrong about this vacation. It'll be the thing that'll finally brings them closer, she just knows it. The thing they'll remember years from now with fond recollections.

Their return to family values, to nature, to each other.

Jenna had even, optimistically, packed her good underwear, un-earthed from the bottom of the drawer.

Not like she particularly desires Jeff's heavy, unimaginative love-making, but she misses being the center of his attention. Frankly, anyone's attention, but she is much too fastidious for an affair, so Jeff will just have to do.

With the lights off, her husband can still pass for a tentative, considerate young man whom she once taught about her body, about the

precise spot on her neck to kiss, and the exact time to pull her hair just so. She wishes he'd use Rogaine or a gym, but he's still tall and still smells the same, like sandalwood and pine, and sometimes it's enough.

With time-worn affection, Jenna watches him mouth words to the song on the radio.

"Twenty years and you haven't killed each other. Congrats." That's what it said on the card Jenna's favorite cousin gave to her on their last anniversary.

Going by the books she's been into lately, it is indeed quite an achievement.

The heroine in the audiobook gasps in shock, uncovering a clue about her duplicitous husband that Jenna figured out an hour ago. Lying in fiction seems to come as a surprise each and every time. Jenna rolls her eyes and chuckles to herself. Now the fool is in for it.

# JJ

**O**UTSIDE, THERE'S SUNSHINE and trees; in his headphones, there's war and mayhem. JJ likes the contrast.

He waits a decent interval, then kicks the back of the car seat in front of him again. He tries to do it just infrequently enough to claim it as an unthinking motion rather than a deliberate act; he knows all about plausible deniability. And anyway, fuck Jeff. And fuck this stupid vacation.

JJ was just as happy at home, meaning not that happy at all, but still . . . He doesn't care for a change of scenery. Doesn't relish the idea of being stuck with his family for a month in some freaking house in the middle of nowhere, like they are on some inane reality TV show.

At home, he at least has places he can go: the game store, the comic book shop, the arcade on the off hours.

JJ makes up names for the reality TV show he feels he's stuck in. He can't decide between Trapped with the Fam and Family Trap. Either way, this vacation feels phony. Like his parents are pretending to be the



sort of parents who do these sorts of things, and he and Jessie have to fall in line and pretend to be the sort of kids who enjoy it. Just goes to show how little Jeff and Jenna know them.

He feels like calling his parents by their names gives him a certain agency, denotes a certain maturity of character, but he hasn't done it out loud yet.

JJ's preferred method of rebellion is a quiet, resentment-flavored simmer.

He shifts in his seat and elbows his growling stomach. Hungry again. It's frustrating how often he is hungry.

He didn't use to be this way. JJ was a skinny kid before; all this weight, he tells himself, is the same puberty nonsense as his squeaky voice and bad skin. Because if it isn't, then it's all his fault, and he doesn't like that at all.

He does like the way his weight separates him from the rest of his stupid family. Jeff isn't skinny but he's nothing like JJ; he's just got a dad bod. JJ is properly fat. The more he eats, the hungrier he is.

While he doesn't love his new body, the heaviness of it all, the swooshy sloshy way it moves, there's something liberating about being fat. He doesn't have to waste time working out the way his mom does, doesn't have to watch everything he eats, count calories, or, worse yet, throw up like Jessie.

JJ doesn't think his parents know this about Jessie, but the two of them share a bathroom and it's impossible not to notice.

Jessie uses an air freshener afterward, like he's dumb, like he can't hear her. Then she drags out the digital scale she keeps in the bathroom and weighs herself. She's as skinny as the girls on TV, but she never seems to be satisfied. JJ can't tell if what he feels for her is sympathy or pity or something else altogether, but he keeps her secret.

In school, JJ went from being an unnoticeable entity to "pizza face" to "fatso." None of it is all that imaginative. He used to get pushed around, but not so much since he stopped showering on a regular

basis. The nicknames have expanded to “stinkbomb” and “turd,” but JJ’s blubber protects him from it all like a squishy carapace.

He works hard at pretending indifference. When he plays his first-person shooter video games, he imagines the generic digital faces on the screen are those of his classmates. He’s very good at shooting and wonders if the skill would carry into real life, but his parents are staunchly anti-gun, so he has no way of finding out.

Once JJ actually walked into a gun range to ask, but they turned him away, saying he had to be at least seventeen and with a parent present. Fucking rules.

JJ pauses his game and searches around in his backpack until he finds a half-eaten Snickers bar. The processed goodness of chocolate and caramel-covered peanuts is like a small high. He almost moans audibly with the sheer pleasure of it. Then he notices Jessie eyeing him with pure disgust and looks away.

Jessie probably thinks she’ll put on weight just by looking at a candy bar. Her stupid twig-like body makes him think of walking sticks of the order Phasmatodea. Something he saw in a documentary once. It’s weird but nature shows balance him out. He can play at war for hours but then fall asleep to the soothing voice of David Attenborough talking about animals.

JJ doesn’t like being in nature, but he enjoys watching it on TV. Most things, in his opinion, are better on a screen than they are in real life.

If they were a TV show family, they’d be fun and quirky and kind and happy in each other’s company, and all their problems would be solved neatly by the end of a thirty-minute episode.

As things stand, JJ wishes his parents would hurry up and get divorced already. They don’t seem to get along or like each other all that much. JJ’s old best friend had divorced parents and recommended it highly, said they were always competing for his attention and affection, going so far as bribing him; plus, he ended up with two allowances and

double the amount of Christmas gifts. It sounds good to JJ, but no, these two are stubbornly sticking it out. Even dragging them on this dumb vacation like it's meant to make up for all the time they spend snapping at or ignoring one another.

JJ used to fantasize that he was adopted. It made perfect sense to him; it explained everything. The way he had nothing in common with his family and looked nothing like them. But then, his parents had to go and dash his dreams by showing him his birth certificate. And sure enough, in black-and-white official ink, there he was, their flesh and blood, their son.

Jeffrey Baker Junior. What a stupid name. Why'd they want two of those? JJ was not much of an improvement, kind of like a clown name, but he was used to it. At least it set him apart.

JJ kicks the seat again. Watches his father tense up but not turn around.

The drive feels endless. The road is a corridor of trees. The more JJ looks at it, the heavier his eyelids get. He unpauses the game, gets to the end of the level, then saves it and shuts it off. Through the now silent headphones he's wearing, he can hear Jeff singing badly to a song on the radio. Jenna's emery board *shrik-shrik* across her talons. Jessie's phone is blowing up with cutesy cartoonish noises as she's scrawling through her Insta feed, probably dreaming of being on there.

That's the soundtrack of his family, the ugly noise of their lives.

JJ boots up the game and leaves it on demo mode; heavy metal techno combination punctuated rhythmically by firing arms thrums in his ears, lulling him to sleep.



# JESSIE

**T**HE TREES ON either side of the road look blandly uniform in a way that makes Jessie want to use some effects on them. Even in sepia, they'd look more interesting, she thinks. Something different, at least. She finds uncurated nature flat and uninspiring. Nothing like the wild explosive life happening in real time on her phone.

She flips between her Insta feed and TikTok, obsessively checking her number of followers. Ugh. It's not enough. It's never enough. Just when she thinks she's getting some traction, she compares herself to others and despairs.

If she were thinner, if she were prettier, if her family had more money . . . There are so many ifs. Online fame is an if-based business. And Jessie wants to be famous.

She's thought of being other things, of going to college, getting a degree, a job, but it all feels daunting and somehow unreal. What is her best-case scenario there? To end up like her parents? Yikes. No thank you.

Objectively speaking, Mom is hot. Jessie knows it because she's heard the uncomfortable MILF comments at school. Her mom's probably hotter than she is. Jessie is well aware those comments are sexist and wrong, and yet a part of her wishes those boys would talk about her that way.

Mom works out like a fiend and eats such a healthy diet. Ugh! Annoying. She doesn't even seem to crave junk. Jessie wishes she had that kind of discipline, but every now and again she slips up. Of course, she purges right afterward, but while the calories may disappear, the guilt remains.

The girls on her phone, the ones with the most followers, look impossible. Their stats are impossible too.

They never went to college, they don't have real jobs, and nobody cares. They have millions of people paying attention to them. They probably have millions of dollars from all that attention.

Jessie has read all the articles about it that she could find, all the interviews. The endorsement fees alone are astronomical.

But besides the money, Jessie fantasizes about what it must be like to be that important. That significant.

Have her depressingly ordinary parents ever felt that way in their entire lives?

She doesn't get them. They are not interesting enough to even try to get. Their rules are dumb. They never have meaningful conversations the way families on TV do. Once her mom even butchered a birds-and-bees talk. Hilariously. As if Jessie would ever be so clueless as to get knocked up. Yuck.

Body functions are pretty gross. Jessie's an old hand at vomiting, but the rest of it sounds absolutely disgusting. Child birth? No thank you. Sex . . . she isn't so sure.

Not like she's even having that much sex. Not like she particularly wants to. She craves attention, sure, but she wants to be adored with eyes, not hands.

Something about the sweaty leering boys in school turns her off. She tried fantasizing about Mr. Polk, her hot young history teacher, but it gets her nowhere. She's had sex, of course. She's sixteen, after all. She doesn't want to be known as a virgin, a snow queen, a prude. And yes, Mom, she used a condom. Every time.

The sex was stab-like uncomfortable at first and later just . . . perfunctory. Nothing special. Nothing like she thought it would be from hearing about it everywhere all the time. The Earth didn't move or anything. Sometimes she wonders if the people who talk about sex being so amazing are lying. To her, to themselves, to each other. If the greatness of sex is just some myth perpetuated generationally because no one wants to be the outlier who says, "But really, what's so great about it?"

Jessie likes that idea because otherwise, it's her. Being weird. Being different.

Still, listening to everyone talk about sex is helpful in its own way. She's watched some porn with her friends, giggling at it but also mentally taking notes. She learned to fake orgasms from it. And from practice, she learned that the fumbling boys didn't care one way or another. They were too busy basking in the sticky afterglow of their exertions.

The only time she felt anything resembling the wow everyone's talking about was during a Spin the Bottle game, six months earlier, when her spin landed on Ainsley Grant. Ainsley is a natural blond, vaguely British, and heartbreakingly pretty, with a name like a movie star.

They were both drunk at the time because no one plays that game sober, and also no one ever says no. Not really. The protestations are all part of the game, because then everyone starts to shout and make fun and cheer you on, and amid that cacophony, on the cheap linoleum floor of the Andersons' basement, Jessie had the best kiss of her life.

Ainsley, always the wild card, pretended to be amused by Jessie's reluctance, so she leaned over and pulled her in by the collar of her T-shirt. Their lips met, and Jessie forgot herself. She forgot the time—

much too late and she'd have to lie to her parents about it. She forgot the place—Jim Anderson's parents were never home. She forgot the crowd—as many as the basement could hold and then a few more. It was the most magically liberating moment. Nothing but pure sensation.

Afterward—after Ainsley playfully pushed her away and laughed, after everyone made their stupid comments and moved on as the party continued—Jessie found that she felt the absence of Ainsley's mouth on hers, that it registered as a loss. She had only seen the word “bereft” in a book and had never used it, but that's how she felt. Bereft.

The feeling confused her, and she asked for another drink. Then another.

Later, throwing up outside the Andersons' shed before heading home on unsteady legs, she saw Ainsley hooking up with Jim. She didn't pull away from him, Jessie noticed before averting her eyes.

Tears stung her eyes, but vomiting often had that effect.

The kiss was never mentioned again, but Jessie thought about it all the time. And no tongue-aggressive, saliva-heavy, sloppy makeout session that followed had ever held a candle to it.

Jessie is woke. She follows all the current trends and brands with all the right values. She stands for all the right things. She has gay friends. Well, at least gay boy friends. She has queer acquaintances, people she knows enough to say hi to.

Jessie believes herself to be the most progressive, open-minded member of her entire family. But something inside her shuts down when she tries to think about that kiss, about Ainsley, about what it might mean for her. She doesn't want to be different, no matter how normal it may be. Jessie wants to be like everyone—well, most everyone else. Life just seems easier that way.

It's like, what would her friends say? And her followers? Her parents?

Jessie hates that she has to even consider the latter. Jeff and Jenna are hip enough as their generation goes. They don't stockpile guns or

wear red baseball hats; they don't casually slur and dismiss it as generational gaffes. They don't go to church. But she's never seen them hang out with anyone who might stand under the LGBTQ+ umbrella and has no idea how they feel about that.

Anyway, soon it won't matter one way or another. Just two short years and she'll be free of them. This gives her two years to get Internet famous . . . or she'll end up stuck in some crappy cheap college her parents can afford, studying for a useless degree and emerging with a ton of debt into an impossible job market. That's no way to make money. No way to be.

Jessie wonders how this Aunt Gussie, whoever she was, made her money. She obviously had plenty. Just look at this house. And that was before the Internet, too.

Jessie imagines her as an impossibly glamorous character having international affairs and hobnobbing with the who's who of the time. Maybe she had rich lovers. Or was secretly a movie star or something. Not that many ways for a woman to make her own money back in the day.

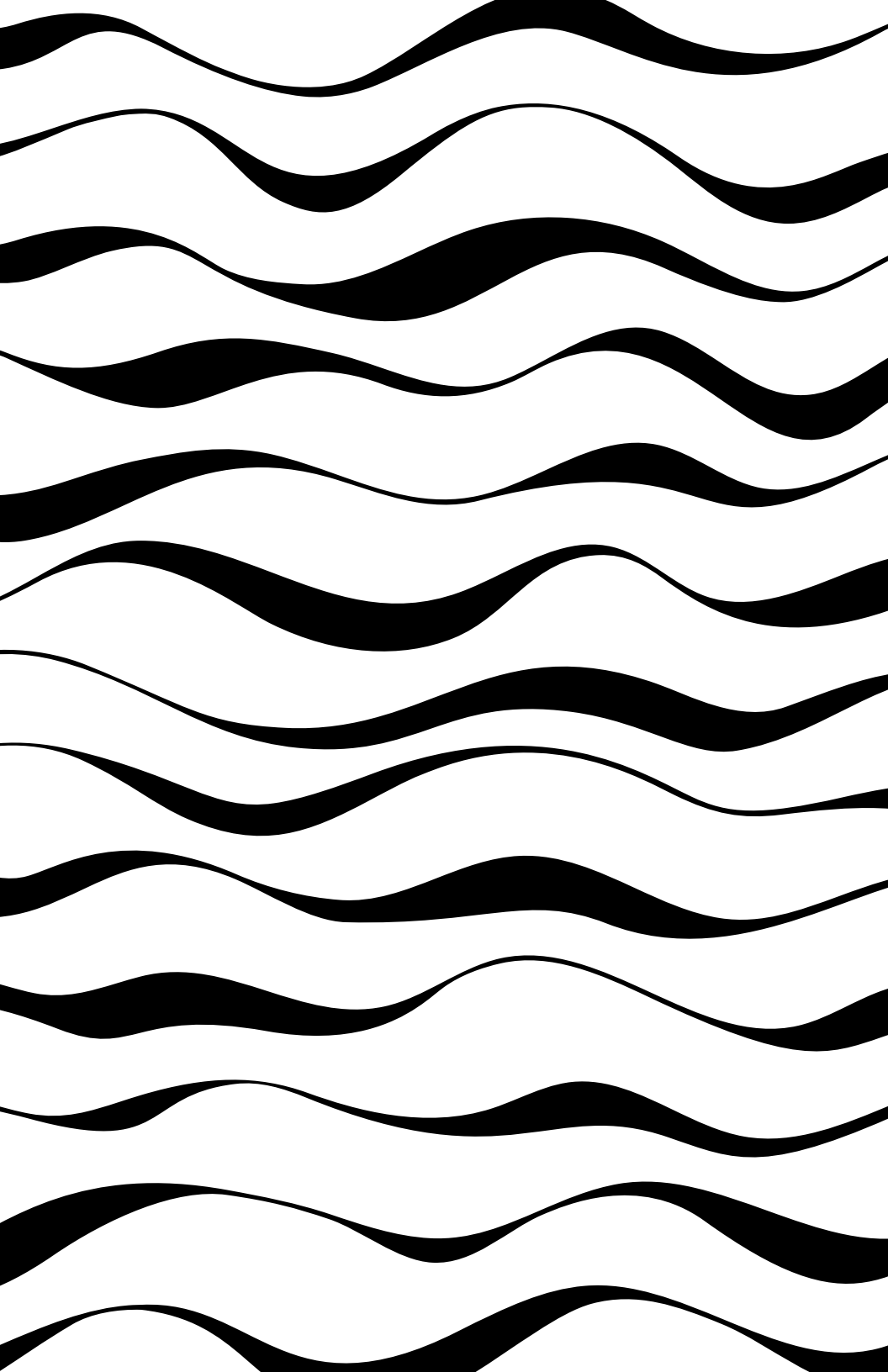
Mom knows nothing about it, of course. She's a tragically incurious person by nature. But Jessie intends to find out. She'll snoop around the house, spend an entire month doing it if she has to. But she'll figure this Aunt Gussie character out.

Now if only they would just hurry up and get there already. Her phone doesn't have much charge left, and she's tired of fighting with JJ for the plug. Plus, she's hungry, and her disgusting, not-so-little brother keeps eating next to her. A freaking Snickers bar. She can't remember the last time she allowed herself such a luxury.

Oh well. She pets her concave stomach. It's worth it. Jessie presses her nails into the palms of her hand and counts to ten. She doesn't know why, but it helps.

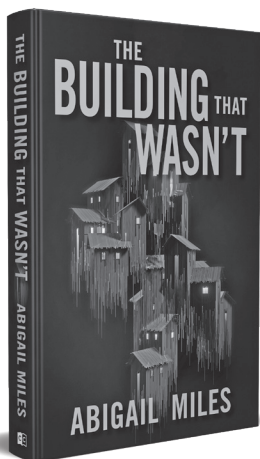
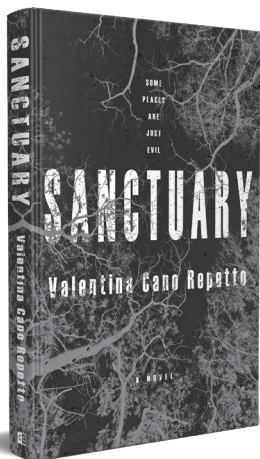
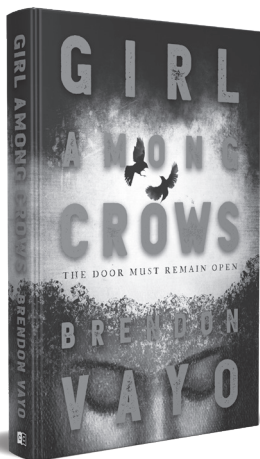
Then she turns her attention back to her phone screen.





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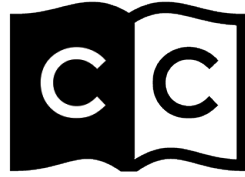
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# WHAT IF REVENGE RIPPLES AND ECHOES THROUGH TIME?

**O**nce upon a time, a girl was born to a family with only boys, a sturdy brood of New Englanders who never found it in their hearts to appreciate someone different from them. They broke her heart and almost broke her, but she got away. Decades later, the Bakers are headed for a perfect family vacation. A full month at a house by the lake. A house passed down from a mysterious aunt no one ever talks about. Love and good intentions aside, what begins like a relaxing vacation turns into a nightmare as each of the Bakers' nerves slowly but steadily begin to fray away at the edges. Are the Bakers' true selves finally being peeled away, layer by layer? Or is it the house, and will it ever let them leave?

For readers who enjoy *The Shining* by Stephen King,  
*Burnt Offerings* by Robert Marasco, and *Kill Creek* by Scott Thomas.



**CamCat**  
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Cover Design: Maryann Appel

Cover Artwork: Geerati, Yaroslav Gerzhedovich

Fiction / Horror

USD\$18.99 CAD\$25.99 GBP£15.99

ISBN 978-0-7443-1175-4

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