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URSULA

Chapter 1

June 2, 2018, 11:26 P.M.

As their taxi slipped down Fifth Avenue past Seventy-ninth Street, Ursula realized she was about to throw up. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, the inky green blur of Central Park to her right. Its two-and-a-half-mile border had seemed luxuriously long when she'd strolled it earlier that spring, buzzing with caffeine and cautiously hopeful about the start of a new season. Now, its length felt torturous and unending. James's hand moved under her dress to the inside of her thigh, exactly where she had wanted it moments ago when they began kissing. Now, as nausea overtook her, she wished for a collision and a quick, albeit tragic, death. *So young. Just thirty-five. Clever. Successful. Quite attractive, depending on whom you asked. So much to look forward to. Pity that she had left her young cat behind. Who would take care of her? Any volunteers? She's a very sweet cat . . .*

The taxi swerved hard into the right-hand lane, jolting Ursula out of her morbid reverie. She opened her eyes and tried to focus on the confused galaxy of taillights up ahead. She searched for a soothing mantra, but all that came to mind was her middle-school JV soccer cheer—"Be aggressive! B-E aggressive! B-E-A-G-G-R-E-S-S-I . . ."—and that was no help.

The taillights spun into an evil vortex, a mocking Charybdis that portended imminent humiliation. It was happening. She had to warn him.

"I might throw up," she murmured, staring down at her pale, freshly shaven knees. James opened his mouth as if to ask a question

but said nothing. He transferred his hand from her thigh to his own as he leaned back, his prior enthusiasm turning to concern.

After a beat, she confirmed—“Yep, this is happening”—as she lurched over her legs and expelled a stream of Sancerre onto the plastic floor mat of the taxi, some of it splattering against the Mansur Gavriel bucket bag she’d bought to celebrate her recent promotion.

“Damn it,” she thought, leaning her head back against the seat. It had been a decent first date until then.

Chapter 2

June 3, 4:07 P.M.

“Wait, you threw up on him?” asked Issa, her eyes wide. “In the taxi?”

“Not *on* him,” Ursula said. “But next to him, yes.” Using her straw, she created a violent whirlpool in her green juice, which had been listed as Self-Compassion Nectar on the menu. She leaned forward to take a sip, but the foamy liquid got lodged halfway up the straw. She leaned back, then tried sucking once more. Unsuccessful again. “I’m glad they don’t have plastic straws here because I don’t want sea turtles getting them stuck up their noses, but this thing doesn’t work.”

The straw was made from avocado husks, which she knew because there was a sign on the counter that read, “Finally! Avocado husks are here!” with a colorful arrow pointing to a ceramic mug of beige straws. For some reason, the mug had breasts.

Issa watched as Ursula struggled with the straw for a few more seconds before plucking it out of her nectar and flinging it to the far side of the round, marble-topped table.

“Always so dramatic,” observed Issa.

“I’m not dramatic,” grunted Ursula, closing her gray-green eyes. “I’m deathly hungover.”

“I noticed that,” said Issa gently. Ursula looked like a sapped, feral version of her normally vibrant self, and her hair was even wilder than usual. A voluminous cloud of honey-blond waves that fell around her shoulders, it recalled the look of a particular babysitter that Ursula had worshipped as a child, whose hair took up substantial space and whose bangs appeared to defy gravity. Ursula remembered aspiring to

that fluffy volume throughout her childhood, but by the time she entered high school in 1997, straightening had become de rigueur, and she woke early every morning to fastidiously iron her hair. It wasn't until college that she began to re-embrace its natural chaos. Now, her hair distinguished her from the many women intent on taming their natural texture. She enjoyed feeling like a wild-maned lion in a sea of slick seals. Issa once told her she looked like a combination of Kim Basinger from *Batman* and a tumbleweed, and Ursula rather liked this comparison.

"What happened?" asked Issa. "No judgment, but why did you vomit on a first date?"

"I don't know," Ursula wailed, rubbing the bridge of her nose, where a spray of freckles had reemerged now that it was June. "I guess I hadn't eaten enough. Yeah, I hadn't eaten anything since noon. And we went to this wine bar in Harlem, where it turned out his friend was the bartender. So the drinks were just flowing, and James weighs like 250 pounds. He has that former-football-player body, you know? Like he used to be really muscular and rocklike, and now he's softer, but he can still absorb an infinite amount of alcohol."

"Whereas you're a wiry little whippet," said Issa.

"I guess I am. Anyway, it was really fun. I have no idea how much I drank. We were just talking and making out, and then we got in a car to head downtown, which was fine for about fifteen minutes. Totally fine. But then an evil demon overtook me."

"The evil demon known as drinking a gallon of wine on an empty stomach," said Issa.

"That's the one."

"How did James respond?"

"He was really nice about it," said Ursula, feeling a simmer of shame.

"That's a good sign."

"I don't know. I just don't think we're going to build an enduring relationship on a foundation of puke," said Ursula, leaning back in her chair and tugging at the velvet scrunchie she wore around her wrist.

"Maybe not," said Issa, recentring the gold pyramid that hung on a long, thin chain around her neck. Whereas Ursula's outer appearance often mirrored her ever-shifting inner state, there was a consistency about Issa's look, no matter how she felt on any given day. Her straight black hair hung symmetrically; and her short, blunt bangs framed her smooth forehead, giving her face an organized look. Upon meeting her, no one was ever surprised to learn that she was an architect. She looked the part: even her ear piercings—four on each side—provided a sense of balance and intention. Though she often wore bronze-colored eyeliner to bring out the golden flecks in her dark-brown irises, today she was makeup-free.

"What happened with the Lebanese guy?" Issa asked.

"I don't know. Maybe mutual ambivalence," said Ursula, taking a sip directly from the glass that left her with a green-foam mustache. "After our fourth date, neither of us followed up. I think he might have moved back to Beirut."

"Hm," said Issa, using a napkin to brush Ursula's upper lip. "And what about that really sweet guy—the veterinarian?"

"Really bad square-toed shoes," said Ursula, shaking her head and placing her hand over her mouth in horror.

"*Oooof*. That's rough." Issa winced. "But you broke up with him over that?"

Ursula shot her a confrontational gaze and held it until Issa relented. "Fine. We can draw the line at square-toed shoes. That's fair."

"He also had that newly divorced energy, you know?" said Ursula.

Issa didn't know, because she'd never dated a divorced man.

"It's like, you know, before the start of the Kentucky Derby, when the horses are all hyped up and they're in their little starting pens? And they're so full of fervor and anticipation? It's like that. These men shoot out of their marriages like horses out of the starting gate. The longer the marriage was, the more aggressively they shoot out. And then they careen all over the racetrack, trying to assess where they fit in the pack . . ."

"The racetrack of dating?"

"Yes. They careen all over the racetrack of dating, and the next few

minutes are anyone's guess. Some crash, some burn out, and a few straighten out and then end up doing well. But when you encounter one of these horses right out of the gate, watch out. They're way too excited and completely unpredictable."

"So a newly divorced man has the fervor of a racehorse?"

"Exactly. It can be overwhelming."

"Maybe this veterinarian racehorse was just excited because he liked you," suggested Issa.

"Ew," said Ursula, suddenly disgusted. She didn't want to think about that particular man ever again. "You know, I'm barely attracted to anyone, even if they're great. Almost everything turns me off these days. I'm pretty much only interested in men who are speaking an indecipherable language that I have no chance of understanding—like Icelandic. It's like I don't even want to engage anymore. I just want to project something onto them and then never find out what they're actually like. Ever. Yes, that's it: I want to date an Icelandic man who promises to never speak a word of English. I think that might work."

"Healthy," said Issa. "Wait, what about Virginia's friend? Didn't she set you up with him?"

"Ugh, the worst. He was one of those guys who starts every other sentence with 'Look . . .'" said Ursula, switching to her bro voice. "'Look, you've gotta think about it like this . . .' 'Look, in my industry . . .' 'Look, I'm a dipshit.'"

Issa laughed. Ursula made a convincing tech bro. Or was she a finance bro?

"Did I tell you about Nicole? The shark?" asked Ursula.

Issa shook her head, her glossy hair sweeping her collarbone. She would have remembered Nicole the shark.

"Well, I saw a documentary last week," said Ursula, "about a great white shark named Nicole. She lived in the waters off Cape Town, but every year, she would disappear for nine months. This isn't normal behavior for a female shark, and the scientists who were observing her had no idea where she went, so they eventually put a tracking device on her. It turns out, she went to Australia—to find love. She didn't like the local South African sharks, so every year, she swam

the 12,000-mile roundtrip just to mate with a higher-caliber foreign shark. Then she would come home, relax, and do it all again the next year.”

“So, we’re going to Australia to find you a mate?” asked Issa.

“We probably should. But that sounds exhausting,” said Ursula, massaging her own temples in slow circles. “It’s okay. I’ve slipped into a state of ambivalence. Acceptance. Maybe even peace. I don’t need a partner. I’m doing fine. I’m good at my job. I have friends—too many friends, actually. I should get rid of some. And Mallory keeps me weirdly busy.”

“A cat can only keep you so busy,” said Issa.

“She needs more attention than you’d think.” Their eyes met and Ursula laughed, burying her forehead into her crossed forearms. After a moment, she sat up and tapped on the surface of the table. “I like this marble. It’s very cooling on the face.”

The lounge was outfitted with ten such tables, each accented with a brushed-bronze ring around the edge. White Carrara marble and rose gold dominated the palette at The Stake, the nouveau feminist wellness club where she and Issa convened as often as their schedules allowed—usually once or twice a month. She had joined two and a half years ago at the insistence of her then-boyfriend Sean’s sister, Hannah, who was an early investor in the enterprise. “It’s a space for modern women to cleanse their psyches and manifest their most audacious goals, unfettered by male influence,” Hannah had explained. “But it’s more than just a community. It’s a *movement*.”

Ursula, whose expertise was in brand strategy, had noticed a lot of young companies describing themselves not as brands, but as *movements*. Movements that sold yoga pants. Movements that sold electric toothbrushes. Movements that sold generic Viagra in discreet unmarked packages so they wouldn’t embarrass you in front of your doorman or neighbors. Movements that sold \$188 serums that would jolt your aging face back to life. Thoughtlessly buying products was out; joining movements was in. But you joined by buying the products.

“Why is it called The Stake?” Ursula had asked Hannah at the time.

"You know, like Joan of Arc. And like so many witch trials throughout history. The stake was the site of punishment for women who asserted themselves, who dared to speak, to lead, to challenge authority," explained Hannah. "This club is reclaiming the symbol of the stake. Today, it's a place where women gather to summon their strength and pool their power."

"Rather than where they go to be publicly burned?" clarified Ursula.

"Exactly," said Hannah, flicking her pointer finger at Ursula to emphasize how correct she was. "Do you want to hear the tagline?"

Ursula waited.

"Aflame with ambition."

"Clever," said Ursula, pretending to sneeze so that her condescension wouldn't hit Hannah directly in the face.

"We also considered *Be well, bitches*," said Hannah. "But *Aflame with ambition* seemed more positive, more productive, less prescriptive. We don't want to tell women how to live. They're free to be well or *not* to be well, you know? It's okay to not be okay."

"Of course," said Ursula. "That was a good decision."

Once The Stake opened its doors in a Manhattan penthouse near Madison Square Park, Hannah had reminded her to join every few days, dropping intel about high-profile women who were signing on as early members: the politically outspoken host of a major network morning show, a celebrity chef who worked exclusively with ten "life-affirming" ingredients, the right-hand aide to the mayor of New York City, a former Olympic figure skater turned climate-change activist. Ursula resisted for weeks and then joined anyway. In the two and a half years since, she had spent more time at The Stake than she had ever anticipated. She was no longer in touch with Hannah or her brother, whom she had dated for three frustrating years. But The Stake had become a hub in her life, and she had even convinced Issa to join.

Despite their participation, however, they both remained conflicted about the authenticity of the club's mission. Some argued that rather than advancing the feminist cause, The Stake bastardized it.

Still, it had its merits: it offered a café and bar, stylish-serene workspaces, and exercise classes that focused more on awakening the spirit than on toning the muscles (though they did that, too). Then there was the spa, whose director, a former *Vogue* editor turned wellness guru, had patented a series of therapies called Soul Softeners™, which were designed to relieve specific types of psychic pain.

For those who needed an immediate and high-aggression release, there was the Smash Center, a white-walled room full of porcelain dishware. Before entering, you chose from a selection of vintage cricket bats and protective goggles, and once inside, you could destroy things until your anger abated. The next door down was the Scream Den, a sound-proof padded chamber that was bookable in fifteen-minute intervals. It was in high demand. (The Stake's founders planned to add two more Scream Dens once they secured their next round of funding.)

Gentler therapies included Hush-Brushing, where you sat in a beanbag chair and a therapist brushed your hair while repeating phrases of your choosing, which ranged from soothing ("Shhhhhh, everything will be okay") to classic ("This too shall pass") to colloquial catchphrases by popular heroines like Lizzo ("you are 100 percent that bitch"). The main lounge featured a Swaddle Station, where members could zip themselves into adult-sized cradles, push a button, and then be mechanically rocked (very, very slowly) to a selection of adult lullabies, custom-composed for The Stake by singer Maggie Rogers. Tucked up a staircase was a row of booths called Sobbing Pods, where you could cry in silence or to a soundtrack of '80s love ballads. A box of tissues was mounted in each pod, and an attendant was available for an optional hug on your way out. Finally, the Womb Room was a sensory deprivation tank where you could float in complete darkness in a bath of warm placenta-infused saltwater, eventually losing your sense of where your own body ended and your "mother's" began. Ursula had only tried it once and deemed it "terrifyingly therapeutic." Upon exiting the Womb Room, she had wept for two hours on one of The Stake's rose-hued velvet sofas, which was perfectly normal, and even encouraged—the club was explicitly designated as a no-judgment

zone where members were encouraged to “feel their feelings.” Neon signs with encouraging statements like “We’ve Got You, Girl” and “Female as Fuck” hung throughout the club.

Massage therapies ranged from typical Swedish and Deep Tissue to the more inventive. For example, if you opted for the “Animal Instinct” massage, you could choose from a selection of five beasts—deer, fox, blue whale, ocelot, or flamingo—and the masseuse would integrate the ethically extracted musk of that animal into the oil for your massage. Ursula had tried out all five musks in the weeks after her breakup with Sean two years ago. She preferred the ocelot.

“Would you like to try a complimentary Bodhisattva Baby?” a Stake staffer appeared at the table between Issa and Ursula, lowering her tray so they could see the sand-colored blobs on offer. “They’re vegan, gluten-free, and brimming with high-strength CBD. They’re made of a proprietary bean blend.”

“Beans are so hot right now,” said Issa, citing a rising dietary trend she had noticed.

“What are those ones?” Ursula asked, pointing to four pink blobs on the far side of the tray.

“Oooh, those are Buddha Babies,” said the staffer. “They’re a little stronger because they’re infused with Xanax. Do you have a prescription on file with us?”

“Yes,” said Ursula, supplying her name and membership number. The staffer set down the tray, pulled a tablet from her back pocket, and verified Ursula’s prescription. Issa gave her friend a surprised look. Reaching for a Buddha Baby, Ursula insisted, “It’s worth doing! If you see the in-house doctor, she’ll write you a prescription that they link to your account. Then you can get Xanax added to anything on the menu.”

“Noted,” said Issa, picking up a Bodhisattva Baby. “Cheers.” She smushed it against Ursula’s blob.

“And save the date,” said the staffer, picking up the tray. “In December, we’re introducing a version that contains psilocybin. Those are called Enlightenment Bombs.”

"Jesus," said Ursula, whose last brush with psilocybin had been during a slightly traumatizing mushroom trip in college.

"Now we're talking. Sign me up," said Issa, pointing to herself. "Issa Takahashi."

"Will do. May the femme be with you," the staffer uttered the club's unofficial salutation, deferentially bowing her head over the tray before moving on to the next table.

"I have to go pretty soon," said Issa, looking at the time on her phone. "I have book club this week and I haven't started the book."

"Such a Basic Book Club Bitch," said Ursula, using the clunky moniker she'd invented and was determined to propel into the zeitgeist.

"Says the biggest Basic Book Club Bitch of them all!" Issa fired back. "Aren't you in four book clubs?"

"Three and a half," admitted Ursula.

"That's obscene. Anyway, I also have to finish some renderings for a client review this week." Issa intended to open her own architecture practice someday, but at present, she led the New York office of her uncle's global firm, which was based in Tokyo. His prominence in the industry was both an advantage and a hindrance to her own professional growth, but she knew she would carve out her own distinct niche in due time. It wasn't a question of if, but when. Issa had an innate confidence that Ursula found comforting. They were both only children, but their outlooks differed. Issa, who had grown up in a Tribeca loft back when the neighborhood was full of actual artists, was grounded by a sense that things would work out as they were meant to. Ursula was perpetually convinced that disaster was imminent.

"Do you want to spend a few minutes in Purple Rain before we go?" Issa asked, referring to The Stake's steam room, where bursts of lavender-scented mist alternated with warm downpours from the ceiling, set to a soundtrack of Prince's greatest hits. Down the hall, a trio of moist-skinned, towel-clad women had just exited.

Issa and Ursula stood up, tightening the sashes of their white waffle-textured robes and slipping their feet into their slippers, whose

toes were embroidered with flames. In the hall, they paused to look at a board advertising upcoming club events:

- CPR for the Soul: Resuscitating the Heart Chakra
- Friend or Foe: The Hidden Perils of Cinnamon
- Navigating the Labyrinth of Female Friendship

“I hate the term ‘female friendship,’” said Ursula.

“Me too!” said Issa. “But why? I like friendship. I like females.”

“I think I hate when ‘female’ is used as a qualifier. And I hate the idea that there’s some fixed notion of female friendship that we all agree on,” said Ursula.

“Right, like you get together at your feminist wellness club and drink green juice and complain about dating.” Issa smiled.

“Right. Who does that?”

“No one I know,” said Issa.

As they stepped into Purple Rain, they could see it was empty, except for a lone, hazy figure in one corner. They shuffled to the far side to sit, shrugging their robes off their shoulders. Steam hissed from under the white-marble benches, thickening the air with heavy lavender vapor.

“So are you really going to take a break from dating?” Issa asked, closing her eyes and leaning her head back against the wall of white subway tiles.

“I think I’m done,” said Ursula. “Permanently done. Romantically retired. I made the effort. I’ve had four long-term boyfriends—no, five.” She paused to think. “Well, four and a half. And I did what everyone said: I tried the dating-app thing for six months. I corrected my resting bitch face. I learned how to hold eye contact. I got into bourbon. I’m tired, Issa. I’m so tired.”

“I don’t blame you,” said Issa, who was able to convey empathy without the hint of pity Ursula sensed in the voices of other happily coupled friends. Issa had been with Eric for ten years. They had all met in college in rural Massachusetts. Ursula and Eric lived on the same hallway freshman year, and although Eric was not an artist,

Ursula had invited him to a figure-drawing class one night, just for fun. The nude model—who turned out to be particularly confident fellow freshman Issa—entered the room, slipped out of her robe, and then dramatically threw it to the floor. She lay down on a platform in the middle of the room, the clean, sculptural lines of her body lending themselves perfectly to the exercise. Afterward, the three of them drank cheap canned beer on the lawn outside the art center. They had been hanging out ever since.

Though Eric had undoubtedly taken note of Issa's beauty during that first encounter, their romance didn't ignite until after college, once they had both had sufficiently tumultuous relationships with other people and then felt ready to commit to someone trustworthy and comfortable. When they reached that point, it was on: first date at twenty-five; living together at twenty-seven; engaged at twenty-eight; married at thirty. And though the relationship timeline suggested an adherence to convention, there was nothing conventional about Issa herself. One look at her fashion choices and notably short bangs, not to mention her hyperbrutalist architectural designs, indicated that she made her own rules. She'd been wearing diaphanous Eileen Fisher tunics since before they became subversively cool—usually paired with Givenchy sandals or Balenciaga boots and the odd Issey Miyake piece. She was one of those magicians who had managed to fully retain her own identity within a romantic relationship—a feat Ursula sometimes envied. Issa had pulled off what appeared to be, so far, an exceptional marriage; but she never judged Ursula for not accomplishing the same.

"Can I just be *your* girlfriend?" said Ursula, leaning her head against Issa's damp shoulder.

"Obviously," said Issa. "You've always been my girlfriend."

Ursula smiled, and then lifted her head.

"I just don't think you should take yourself out of the dating pool," said Issa. "That would be a crime against humanity."

"Fine," conceded Ursula. "But just because I *want* a stable commitment doesn't mean I'm entitled to one. I'm good at certain things, but maybe sustaining a romantic relationship just isn't in my skill set."

"I don't know. Sometimes I think the people who flaunt their healthy relationships are actually the worst at them. Remember Lisa Hutchens?" Issa looked around to make sure Lisa, who was a member of The Stake, wasn't lurking somewhere in the steam. Lowering her voice, she went on, "She dated, like, twenty guys in our first few years in New York after college, and there was so much drama. Then she finally had one seminormal relationship, and now she's a dating coach."

"I believe she's actually a 'whole heart coach' according to her Instagram," said Ursula, matching Issa's hushed tone.

"Exactly!" exclaimed Issa. "She married some private equity guy, and now she's telling everyone else what to do with their hearts."

"Their *whole* hearts," clarified Ursula.

"Yes, their whole hearts. So you don't need to solicit Lisa's whole-heart services, but I don't think you should quit. Maybe you could just be more open-minded about who you date?"

"*Whom* I date," said Ursula.

"Shut up," said Issa, who knew that Ursula nitpicked about grammar as a way to avoid the topic at hand. "Don't change the subject."

"Lately, the guys I meet in real life end up being even weirder than the ones I meet on the apps. Because you don't even have baseline information about them," said Ursula. "But the apps are terrifying too. They're fun for a few months, and then they start to make you feel like you're in a weird video game with real-life consequences. Like, choose wrong and you could get an STD! Choose *really* wrong and you could get murdered!"

"Is it really that extreme?" asked Issa skeptically. She had never used a dating app.

"Yes. No. Sometimes. Not really," said Ursula. "But it's absurd how little information you have to go on before you decide whether to meet someone. A few photos, maybe some witticisms they've put in their profile, possibly some banter over text. It's just so hard to screen for sensibility. Honestly, it's hard to screen for *teeth*. Did I tell you I got coffee with a guy who only had four visible teeth?"

"What? Where were the rest of them?"

"I don't know!"

"Why did you meet him?!"

"He only had one photo, and his mouth was closed!" said Ursula. "This is what I'm trying to tell you. If I can't even find a guy with teeth, how am I going to find someone who is smart and handsome and doesn't hate cats—maybe even values cats for the magical creatures they are—and appreciates my neuroses and isn't a chauvinist and can cook and recycles and knows that bowling is overrated and loves Chris Rock and Tilda Swinton, and . . ."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Issa held up her hands. They disappeared into the steam in front of her. "You have to open up your mind. You're being too specific."

"Am I?" said Ursula. "Or is love actually about specificity? You know those coffee mugs that say, 'The key to a good relationship is hating the same things'? Maybe that's exactly what it is, but it's also liking the same things and being ambivalent about the same things. And also hating something for a while but then coming around to liking it, together at the same time. Like, you don't care about gardening at all, but then you evolve into it together, so the other person never feels abandoned. One day you both wake up and you say, 'Is it time for us to finally buy some mulch?' and your husband nods, as if the exact same urge had been simultaneously building in him."

"That's a tall order," said Issa.

"I want my life partner to be a tall order," said Ursula. "I don't want him to be one of a thousand interchangeable guys who are 'nice.' I want him to accept how annoying I am, and not just accept it, but enjoy it. And I want him to know, deep in his heart, that bowling is fucking boring and overrated. Because it is."

"I will never understand your beef with bowling." Issa shook her head. "Can I ask you a question? This is a serious question, so take it seriously. Do you think you might have some reluctance around commitment?"

"Like I'm deluding myself about wanting a partner, when I'm actually just deeply commitment-phobic?" asked Ursula. "No, it's worse than that. I've had multiple long-term relationships, so this isn't your

run-of-the-mill commitment problem. In fact, I'm *completely* capable of committing—but only to noncommittal men. The emotionally available ones just don't do it for me. They have to be emotionally avoidant and fully resistant to personal growth, and then I'm totally on board."

"Sick puppy." Issa smiled. "But you're more self-aware than you used to be. I'll give you that."

"I think the real issue," said Ursula, "is that I'm weird—very, very weird. Not in a cute, quirky, rom-com way, but in a slightly disturbing way. Not like, 'She crinkles her nose when she laughs! Wacky!' But like, 'She walks down the street with her cat in one of those bubble backpacks,' or 'She uses a vibrator as a face massager.'"

"I'm sorry, what?" Issa turned to Ursula.

"Yeah, I got one of those backpacks where the cat can see out of a clear bubble, like a spaceship. I haven't used it yet, but . . ."

"No, the other thing. The vibrator on your face."

"Oh, well you know how everyone is into facial massage lately? To promote circulation, stimulate your muscles, drain your lymphatic system . . ." said Ursula.

Issa nodded.

"Well, I saw this thing online that was being sold for \$199 as a facial massage tool, and it looked exactly like a vibrator," said Ursula. "So I just got a mini vibrator for \$11 and I use that instead."

"Your face does look really good," said Issa. Then, cautiously, "Is that *all* you use it for?"

"Yesssss," said Ursula, rolling her eyes. "This one is explicitly for facial use."

"Hm," Issa cocked her head to the side, wondering if she should get a vibrator for her own face.

"The point is," said Ursula. "I'm not normal, and my weirdness has never properly aligned with someone else's weirdness, and I don't know if it ever will. I just can't imagine it. But I refuse to rein myself in anymore. I'm going to put my cat in the backpack, and that's that."

The lavender steam hissed and then abruptly shut off. A brief silence followed as "Darling Nikki" ended and "When Doves Cry"

began. Out of the mist, a woman appeared in front of them. She had short, bleach-blond hair that was slicked back, giving her an aerodynamic look. “I don’t mean to eavesdrop,” she said in an Australian accent. “But I was sitting over there and I heard you talking. I think you might be interested in this.” She pulled a business card out of the pocket of her robe and handed it to Ursula.

In gilded, embossed serif font it read: “Be more particular.” Ursula flipped it over. The back had a website.

She looked up. “What is this?” she asked.

“It’s hard to explain,” said the woman. “It’s probably better if you just check out the website.”

“Okay, thanks,” said Ursula, looking at the card, which had an authoritative weight to it.

“Enjoy your steam,” the woman said as she headed for the door and left the room.

“That was weird,” said Ursula.

“Yeah, who brings business cards into a steam room?” asked Issa.

“The Arc,” Ursula said aloud, wondering what it could be.

Suddenly, the ceiling emitted a downpour of lavender rain. Ursula closed her eyes and leaned back, letting the heavy drops hit her face. *Blap, blap, blap.* On her eyelid. Above her lip. *Blap, blap, blap.* From the waterproof speakers, Prince moaned:

*Dig if you will the picture,
Of you and I engaged in a kiss.
The sweat of your body covers me.
Can you, my darling? Can you picture this?*

Chapter 3

June 7, 7:42 P.M.

Ursula put her key into the lock of her Brooklyn apartment and anticipated Mallory's ritual greeting: a soft, grateful squawk that Ursula interpreted as "I missed you so much," but which actually meant "Feed me now."

"Yes, my little Bundt cake," she said as Mallory smashed her forehead into Ursula's shins. She kneeled down and took her cat's small gray face into her hands. "You know I always come home."

She threw her keys on the table by the door, missing the ceramic dish she'd bought explicitly to keep things from getting lost, and traversed the living room to the wooden cupboard where Mallory's food lived. Ursula could hear the cat's paw-thumps behind her as her squawks increased in intensity, volume, and cadence. She pulled out the bag of dry pellets and poured them into a plastic food puzzle—an orb that released one pellet at a time when knocked around the floor. Her vet had insisted on feeding Mallory this way to prevent weight gain. "Make her work for her food, just like she would have to in the wild."

Ursula's apartment, on the ground floor of a brownstone in Carroll Gardens, was not exactly wild, but it did have a garden and a fireplace, which was rare at her price point. She had moved in after Superstorm Sandy ravaged low-lying parts of the neighborhood, getting an almost unheard-of deal on rent.

Mallory attacked her food puzzle with a joyous pounce, chasing it around the floor as if it were a desperate, doomed chipmunk.

Ursula opened the fridge and pulled out a half-full bottle of pinot

noir, which she preferred to drink cold in the summer, although the solstice was still fourteen days away. She poured a generous glass—a “country club pour,” as Issa would say—and then regarded the bottle, wondering if there was such thing as the human equivalent of a food puzzle. A wine puzzle? Like one of those silly straws she’d used as a child, with twists and loop-de-loops that forced you to suck with all your might to extract the liquid. Make you work for your pinot noir.

Mallory maneuvered into the corner of the living room, where she jammed her paw at the puzzle in pursuit of the final pellet. Ursula had adopted the steel-colored cat two years ago as her relationship with Sean crumbled. They had been wildly in love for a while—that’s how she remembered it, at least—but when she brought up the question of marriage two years in, the relationship began its swift descent. Emergency landing. Brace for impact.

She had tried to backpedal. Forget marriage. What about just moving in together? Staying in their own apartments but sharing a dog? How about a long vacation to clear the air? Sean wouldn’t commit to anything more than a week in advance, ever.

One day, she stumbled upon an animal adoption event in the park a few blocks from her apartment. The delicate cat with wide, moss-green eyes caught her attention immediately. A middle-aged woman wearing a fluorescent-yellow volunteer vest came up beside her and looked at the cat, whose cage was labeled:

Mallory, ~1 year. Russian blue. This dainty cuddle bug is a deep, empathetic soul who gets along with cats, dogs, children, everyone! Loves a little catnip on a Saturday night, and will be your best friend in no time. Spayed, fully vaccinated, dewormed.

“*Such* a beauty,” the volunteer said. “She is—I kid you not—the sweetest cat I’ve ever met, and I’ve met a lot of cats. A *lot*.”

Ursula had no doubt.

“She was living behind a dumpster on Staten Island,” the woman continued. “She had a litter, although she’s no more than a baby

herself. Maybe one year old, I'd guess. An absolute doll. Her kittens got snapped up last week, but she's still here."

Ursula held her hand up to the bars of Mallory's cage, and the cat tentatively sniffed her fingers. She looked into Ursula's eyes as if evaluating her, and Ursula found herself gently hoping that the cat would approve. Just then, a man approached with his toddler daughter, who was pulling his hand so forcefully that her body formed a 45-degree angle to the ground.

"A kitty cat!" She pointed to Mallory.

"Yes, a kitty cat!" said the dad. The toddler stopped short of the cage, where Mallory had scurried toward the back and scrunched herself down into a headless mound of fur. She sat completely still, her body a perfect bell curve.

"I want her!" squeaked the toddler.

Ursula suddenly felt possessive of the cat. She held her breath as the man explained that this wasn't the right time to get a pet, because Baby Brother would be here soon. The toddler eventually conceded, and they wandered off toward the puppies.

Ursula stared into the cage, and Mallory lifted her head and met her eyes again.

"I'll take her," Ursula said to the volunteer. She'd left her apartment that morning in search of coffee; she returned with Mallory in a borrowed plastic carrier. Once home, she set the carrier on the floor and opened its wire door. Mallory waited a full minute before cautiously stepping out, looking around, and then bolting under the couch. Ursula got down on her stomach and could just make out the dark outline of Mallory's domed back. "It's okay," she said. "You're very safe here." After she'd put out food and water, she called Sean, chirping with excitement about her new acquisition.

"You impulse-bought a cat?" he asked.

"No, I impulse-*adopted* a cat," explained Ursula.

He seemed miffed that she'd made the decision without him. "Well, would you have supported it?" she asked.

"Now we'll never know," he said.

"I guess we won't. By the way, are you coming to Roger's barbecue with me tomorrow?"

"Maybe so, maybe no," Sean said.

Ursula knew that meant "probably" in Sean's personal patois, which was a labyrinth of equivocation and quivering half commitments.

Within three months of Mallory's arrival, Ursula and Sean broke up. The cat never took to him, perhaps because he whistled at her as if she were a dog. His whistle repelled her, yet he persisted.

Her pinot now poured and in hand, Ursula began leafing through her mail, separating it into three piles: Read Right Now, Deal With Later, Toss Immediately. Tonight's Read Right Now pile consisted of the *New Yorker* and an L.L.Bean catalog. She wavered between the two, but then shifted the *New Yorker* into the Deal With Later pile, next to which sat the business card from the woman in the steam room. "Be more particular," it reminded her.

She and Issa had taken guesses about what The Arc might be: An escort service? A cult? A Greco-Roman wrestling society? A fetish-matching startup? A portal into an alternate world where men's fertility expired earlier than women's?

She picked up the card and set it down, along with her wine, on her mid-century coffee table, then flopped onto the couch and began leafing through L.L. Bean. Ursula had lost her taste for women's fashion magazines long ago—too formulaic, too spineless—but she loved perusing catalogs, because she could insert whatever narratives she pleased. Red wine and L.L. Bean was her idea of a nice little Thursday night. She flipped the pages, letting the flannels and fleeces soothe her like a salve. A multiethnic couple in shawl-collared sweaters laughed on the steps of a farmhouse, their heads thrown back, faces tilted toward the sky. A group of glossy-haired, vest-clad young women carried logs, their eyes alight with optimism. An older couple in rubber-soled duck boots navigated a leaf-strewn dirt path, their shepherd mix trailing them with a dog-grin that said, "Now *this* is living." A lumberjacky man carried a tray of grilled corn on the cob,

presenting it with chivalrous panache to someone who waited just out of the frame, someone who had obviously tamed his rugged heart. His eyes blazed as if his entire future rested on how this corn was received. Maybe he was offering it to Helen of Troy herself, thought Ursula. The face that launched a thousand corncobs. Perhaps he even had an engagement ring squirreled away in one of his black-and-red-checked pockets, which he planned to unveil once Helen had raked her teeth across two (Or three! They were so good!) perfectly charred and buttered cobs.

Ursula wondered if a flannel-clad man would ever hold out a corncob to her as if she were the only woman that mattered—perhaps had ever truly mattered—to him. She dared not let herself hope for such things.

She took an emboldening sip of wine, pulled her laptop onto her knees, and typed in the URL.

A black screen appeared, and then the words:

Lasting love is in the details. *It's time to be more particular.*

Enter your email to learn more.

The text faded to black and an entry field popped up. Ursula stared at it. “Seems like a scam,” she thought. “I’m probably going to be sex-trafficked.”

But her curiosity trumped her incredulity. She typed in her email address and hit “Submit.”

She resumed leafing through the catalog, feeling nostalgic. Not for her own childhood, but for the L.L.Bean childhood that she never had: canvas tote bags artfully strewn about the mudroom, a golden retriever curled up on the couch, families laughing in matching pajamas. Since when had matching pajamas become such a thing?

Her work inbox chirped with a new message: *Urgent—Brand Meeting Tomorrow Morning.*

One of her clients was summoning the “dream team” for an 8:30

A.M. check-in. Ursula growled, startling the cat, who had been lying on her back on the floor like a starfish. Mallory curled upward into a precarious crunch position, held it for four seconds, then slowly relaxed back onto the ground, legs and tail splayed.

“8:30 in the morning?” thought Ursula. “That’s psychotic.”

She replied: *Perfect. See you then!*