

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

STOCKHOLM

A Short Story

CATHERINE STEADMAN

New York Times bestselling author

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Overhead, the “Fasten Seat Belt” sign pings off.

We have leveled out, cruising at an altitude of thirty-seven thousand feet, high above the morning clouds of JFK International and bound for Stockholm. First-class, seven and a half hours nonstop. I used to tell my patients to imagine their thoughts as clouds passing high above them. I told them to imagine lying on the cool grass and watching these clouds drift and dissipate. It rarely worked on my obsessive CEOs and high-strung Manhattan socialites. Luckily, as a psychiatrist, I had the added benefit of being able to offer them very powerful prescription medications as well.

I know my chances of getting through this rely on me staying calm, and yet . . . and yet, a little voice in my head asks me, *Why? Why, if you are so capable, haven't you managed to get away from this situation before?* The voice won't just “be a cloud” for me, and so I imagine a pillow instead and place that pillow firmly over the voice's mouth until it goes silent.

The effects of my own prescription meds are kicking in anyway. I let my breath deepen as I stare out at the cobalt sky through the cabin window. No clouds in sight.

He makes sure I take the pills. I've gotten pretty good at squirreling them away, at avoiding their effects, though I didn't make use of that skill today. This morning, I gladly let them bob down my throat as he watched. I knew I'd need help with the nerves.

This trip is a surprise. An anniversary gift from him after two years of marriage. A city break, to Stockholm. Sebastian is beginning to trust me, it would seem. After half a year of me playing my role impeccably, he thinks he might have finally broken me.

It did not start like this, our relationship. When we first met, the power shifted constantly, and I luxuriated in the push and pull. I was addicted to the all-consuming need of it. I was complicit in allowing a certain dynamic to wrap its tendrils around me.

So who am I to complain if the grip has become too tight and I can no longer move? In my defense, no one really knows how much they can take until they finally reach their limit. My limit came the first night I decided to leave him.

Needless to say, I never made it over the threshold. It nearly broke me—*he* nearly broke me—that night. Not physically, you understand; no, never physically. He is far too calculating for that. A cardiothoracic surgeon, he's got too much to lose: a career, a reputation. Signs of physical violence would ruin everything; they could be used as grounds to dissolve my conservatorship. He'd never allow that. You see, right now, I have no rights, no choice in where I live or sleep or what happens to my finances.

I remember him telling me once, early in our courtship, how intimate it felt to hold a stranger's heart in his hands when he operated. It's a sharp and bitter favor to recall how impressed I was.

I leaf through the glossy pages of the in-flight magazine, filled with shots of smiling couples, crisp Scandinavian skies, and joyfully colored buildings. I feel his presence in the seat beside me, engrossed in his hospital paperwork, my captor.

It amazes me that people do not see what's going on when they look at us. *She is so lucky*, they seem to think—those friends I no longer see, my old work colleagues, the girls I grew up with, even the staff bustling silently about our apartment.

I don't have anything in common with the people from my old life. It got too hard to listen to their quotidian problems over lunches.

In the aisle, a flight attendant deftly pops the cork on another bottle of Laurent-Perrier Grand Siècle. She leans in with her calibrated smile to refill a passenger's frosted long-stem glass.

My husband is looking at me when I turn back, his warm brown eyes studying me, perhaps curious as to the thoughts flitting beneath my surface, like fish he'll never be able to net.

After a pause, a grin breaks across his handsome features. That ambiguous smile of his: clean cut, wholesome, but with a hint of something else lurking right behind it. An invitation to find out what might happen if you were to engage with it—to find out how far things might go, and how quickly. It still sends a fizz of excitement through me.

I felt it when I met him: his unwavering self-control, his discipline, his assurance. I knew the quality, and qualities, of my opponent long before the game began in earnest. His limits were as unclear as my own, so we began to test each other, to see where the edges of what was permissible lay.

I found I liked feeling the full force of his power turned back on me—the rush of possessing him, forcing his strength, his obsession, onto me. In

turn he would push me, bend me to his will.

I fucked a junior doctor on his ward to test how strong our bond had become, and I got the answer I wanted. He didn't like it one bit. His possession stepped up a gear, and I liked it. He found he liked it too, and so the scales fell away, and we truly saw each other for the first time.

The sex, incredible. Rageful, all-consuming, and corrective.

Thirteen years as a practicing psychiatrist ought to have taught me better than to awaken dormant things in other people—but I stand by the idea that love should be honest with itself, that anything else is just duty.

I give him a sleepy smile so he knows the drugs are working. I am docile. He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear paternally before dipping back into his work. Emails, test results, patient data.

He is finishing up with work so he can focus on our holiday. He must work, you see; I had to give up my job a year after our wedding. His work is the only thing that sustains our lifestyle. *He* sustains us.

In the aisle, a flight attendant dips down by my side, her voice low, conspiratorial, and friendly. “Champagne?” she asks. I feel my heart constrict at her ease, the fact that she doesn't see what is right in front of her.

All the flight attendant sees in me is an attractive, well-groomed Upper East Side brunette with a delicate Cupid's bow and piercing green eyes. They still twinkle, my eyes; my skin still glows; my hair still shines and bounces because Seb pays a hairdresser a fortune to keep it that way. I am a doll made to look like a fully functioning woman, a woman who has a choice in what she does, or thinks, or drinks. But that woman is not real.

Before I can accept or decline the champagne, his warm voice cuts in over us, and we turn to him. My charming, funny, handsome husband. “Probably best not, right, honey? With your medications?” he says lightly, half-in, half-out of work.

Medications. A subtle introduction—for this stranger—to the idea that my judgment is not to be trusted. He's clever, reassuring, and he always has been.

To her credit, the attendant's eyes flicker back to me to check I am OK with this.

The little voice inside me tells me to grab her hand and tell her: “I was a real person. I had a beautiful office on the Upper West Side and long-standing patients—start-up loners, terrible mothers, absent fathers, sociopaths, narcissists, sex addicts, people who could not stop and yet could

not remember why they had started in the first place. I was very good at my job. I turned dysfunctional parasitic behaviors into high-functioning symbiotic ones. My time was respected and sought after and expensive.”

But I don't listen to the little voice. Instead, I give her a distant nod, and she rises, wordlessly, moving on. If I take it, he will only hand it back to her. He'll explain he's a doctor. And that I'm not well. I have water in my hand luggage anyway. I have learned to be prepared.

Out of medical school, there's a kind of joke that you pick the specialty that *you* need the most help with. Well . . . my beautiful “mommy” killed herself after my rich “daddy” left us for another woman. Make of that oversimplification what you will.

My stomach groans. I was too nervous to eat this morning. Now I peruse the in-flight lunch menu as he types away next to me.

A suppressed giggle reaches us from across the aisle and draws both of our gazes. A young couple, hands intertwined, whispers over the lowered seat barrier between them. Her hair falls in soft, tousled waves over a smart pantsuit; he's ruddy cheeked in cashmere and chinos. On their clasped hands I pick out the bright glint of two fresh rings. Sebastian sees them too. Without looking back to me, he slips his hand into mine, and I have to wonder for the thousandth time what he thinks our relationship actually is now. Perhaps that simplicity is all he ever wanted.

It's funny . . . His proposal was one of the most gratifying moments of my life. A castle stormed, a victory won, the spoils mine. The uncontrollable caught, bound, immobile. Two people giving themselves to each other, all their flaws and intentions clear. Real love.

I knew nothing about him the night I met him. I could not have known how far we would stray from the mainstream. I just knew I wanted him.

In a sea of old money and privilege, he looked so alive, so vital by comparison. Picture a society charity dinner: a ballroom bedecked in twinkling lights, banquet tables laid in silver service. The evening was in aid of one global crisis or another. Is it wrong that I forget which? There have been so many since. One of my clients had recommended me to the charity's board. My clients often liked to flex their muscles after telling me *too much*, as if to remind me, or themselves, that whatever dysfunction they might have didn't seem to be standing in the way of their success. Nights like those were a display of wealth, of power—and conveniently a direct tap into the source of my demographic.

I would be lying if I said I didn't have an inkling even then. He had an energy, a dynamism that made one want not necessarily to displease him but to test the limits of his magnanimity. To see what might happen if he lost control. They say if you are attractive enough, you can get away with almost anything.

That first jolt of adrenaline as his eyes found mine across the table. He'd felt me staring.

Lust is underrated. Whole relationships can survive on it. I doubt there was a woman there that night who didn't fleetingly consider what it might feel like to be alone with him.

Later that night, as I waited in line at the bar, a hand found my back, a whisper in my ear. I said something funny in response. I used to be funny back then, or just quick-witted, I forget which.

"I'm not a piece of meat, you know," he replied with that grin.

Three hours later I let him fuck me against the quartz countertop of his park-facing penthouse, my body alive with electricity. The cool countertop pressed hard against my soft flesh, and beyond the glass, the sparkle of the city framed the dark void of Central Park.

He would call me between patients and I would slip out to the restroom, remove my underwear, and let him tell me what to do until I heard his breath shudder.

But it was more than sex for us. He made even the most banal activity fun: A trip to the store became an adventure in experimental cuisine. A journey on the subway was an opportunity to quietly whisper in each other's ears. We were one of those couples you can imagine getting old together.

The lease on my apartment was the first thing to go. I moved in with him ten months after we met, a bright ball of excitement.

I met his family: upstate old money, cold but reliable—he's the only child of unimpressible parents. And he listened so intently to everything I said about my family.

I'm snapped back to reality by a squeeze to my hand. Sebastian and the returned flight attendant are both staring at me.

"Have you made your lunch choice?" she asks again. I sense her embarrassment on my behalf.

"Er, yes, lobster salad and the gnocchi. Thank you," I tell her.

Klonopin is a tranquilizer; it's more addictive than Xanax.

He told me about this trip only three days ago, and that's when the

decision solidified and the plan took shape.

The plan is to disappear.

After the court case, my reputation was destroyed. I will never work as a doctor again. There is only one way out of this marriage. And it is not the legal route, I have found.

Scandinavia has one of the most comprehensive welfare systems in the world: the Nordic model. The warm embrace of civilization. What Canada was to Offred. If I want to break free of him, there is nowhere on the planet I could be surer of finding help.

I have researched the city online. I know Stockholm's museums, its sights, its restaurants, at least the ones we might venture into. I have committed to memory the main streets and where they lead.

Sebastian hasn't told me where we are staying or precisely what our itinerary entails, so once we land, I will need to stay sharp. I need to conserve my energy now. I carefully return the in-flight magazine to its pouch and rest back into my seat. I can feel the Klonopin taking over, the hot flush of it through my veins. *It is OK to sleep now*, I tell myself. *Who knows when I'll next get the chance?* I let my eyes flicker shut, just for a moment.

I wake with a start. The landing gear hits the runway with a thump as reverse thrusters roar to life beneath us.

In the terminal, we retrieve our bags from the carousel. I am groggy and ravenous from my Klonopin sleep, which lasted the entire flight. I was not disturbed when my meal arrived, but experience has supplied me with a banana and snacks hidden in my bag.

"I just need to use the restroom, honey," I tell him in a voice loud enough for bystanders to hear. He studies me, assured in the knowledge that he has my passport in his own pocket and we have not yet cleared customs.

He smiles. "No problem. Be quick, though—we've got another flight to catch."

His words hit me—a gut punch. I try to keep the fear from my voice. "We're not staying in Stockholm?" I ask.

"Nope. No Stockholm," he answers with a broad grin, loving the new game we're playing, where I pretend not to be completely back footed and he pretends not to notice.

"Surprise," he adds with breezy playfulness. He watches me for a

reaction, but I manage to hide it.

“You know me too well,” I tell him, with a slow smile. “Nothing beats a surprise.” And with that I turn from him and hazily make my way toward the yellow signage of the restrooms.

As I weave through the busy concourse, my carefully hidden panic escalates before it hits the cap of the remaining Klonopin in my system. I have never been so glad to be drugged in my life. I feel my plans slipping away. The little voice inside me stirs awake.

I’d had a miscarriage in my second trimester. We had a name, a crib, wallpaper.

After the forced induction, the painful labor, the stillbirth, my hormones fell off a cliff. Life briefly lost its color and I made a silly mistake. I crashed, on the freeway, hit the median.

Not deliberately, as they said in court. I just lost focus, for a second, windows down, sun on my skin. A song came on the radio and I didn’t want to hear it. I fumbled it off, and the rest is history.

I didn’t just take my eye off the road that day; I took my eye off Sebastian—and he revealed himself fully for the first time. While I lay in the hospital, he hired a lawyer; professional witnesses were called. What happened to my mother—she hung herself—was discussed, as were hereditary conditions, my stillborn baby, and postnatal trauma. My own profession, and my reasons for following it, were scrutinized, and the court made a decision in my absence.

It was only ever meant to be a temporary measure, just in case I did something, but here I am, a year later, with no rights and no end in sight.

A flight announcement sounds overhead, and my eyes flit to the departures board as I keep moving. Two connecting flights are listed as departing within the next hour: one to Dubai and one to Kiruna. My stomach flips at the possibility of Dubai, though I have no idea where in the world Kiruna is.

I reach the restroom and disappear gratefully into a large stall. I wrestle my banana and cereal bar from my handbag and gorge myself on them, trying to organize my dazed mind.

My thoughts arrange themselves: if we were traveling to Dubai, we would have flown directly from JFK, so we must be heading to Kiruna. I

flush the toilet and exit my stall. There is a woman at the row of sinks. I know better than to appeal to strangers for help, to explain my predicament, to desperately spew forth my story. And so I say, with a smile, “Hi there, do you speak English?” The woman looks up. She’s in her twenties and wears a bright blue quilted vest and a backpack. “Strange request,” I continue, “but I wonder if you could look something up for me on your phone? Do you know anything about Kiruna? I’m flying there this afternoon. It’s an anniversary surprise and—”

The woman looks at me blankly, then gives a brusque shake of her wet hands before ducking past me to drown my words out with the air dryer. Perhaps she can sense the desperation in me and cannot help but recoil.

I watch her flit out of the restroom, and my eyes find myself in the large wall mirror. But I don’t look desperate; I look rich and ridiculously in control of my life in my cashmere coat and Prada boots. An avatar dressed by someone else. I pull myself together as I hear someone in the stall behind me flush; a rosy-cheeked woman in her fifties appears behind me, smiling in the mirror’s reflection.

“I’m sorry, dear; I’m going to be a busybody as usual, but I overheard you out here. Asking about Kiruna. We are flying to Kiruna also.” Her accent is thickly Scandinavian and unbelievably settling. I take in her warm snow coat and boots. “Where are you staying up there?” she asks.

I let out a little laugh of relief. “Where am I staying? I have no idea. He won’t tell me yet. It’s a surprise. Anniversary surprise. I don’t even know where Kiruna is. I thought we were going to Stockholm.”

She chuckles. “Oh, well, he is a very clever fish, then. My husband has always been very bad at surprises. I can always see through him,” she tells me as she merrily washes her hands. She eyes my clothes with curiosity. “I hope he packed you warmer things, though. You look beautiful for the city, my dear, but you will be cold up there.” She catches my concern. “Oh no. Most hotels provide snow wear. I am sure he’ll have thought of everything.”

“Up there?” I ask, pressing for more.

“Kiruna is in the far north. The northernmost tip of Sweden. Arctic circle. Lapland. Some nights they have negative thirty.”

I feel the blood drain from my face. We are going somewhere isolated.

She chuckles once more at my silence. “Don’t worry. It’s very cozy up there, I promise; that is why we go. Very romantic. You are a lucky girl.” She reaches past me, instead of heading away to the air dryer, to grab a few paper

towels and pats her hands dry. “Well, I will see you on the flight. Congratulations for your anniversary, my dear. And good luck.” She beams before ambling away.

Only twelve of us board the small propeller plane headed north to arctic Sweden. Sebastian is vigilant to my every move, after my unaccompanied detour. So much so that as I pass the woman from the restrooms to find my seat, I’m eternally thankful she restrains her greeting to a twinkly smile rather than an introduction. She doesn’t want to spoil our anniversary surprise.

We sink into our seats, and Sebastian pulls me into a kiss. I let him.

“We’re heading north, aren’t we?” I ask him softly, using the intimacy as collateral.

“How do you know?” he asks, his brow furrowing.

I indicate the other passengers around us in their all-weather gear and snow boots.

He smiles. “Don’t worry. A guide’s meeting us there. We’ll have everything we need.”

I don’t doubt it. Sebastian is never anything but prepared.

The flight is short. I use the ninety minutes to think through my options and watch out the window as, beneath us, Sweden turns into a land of ice and snow. In the seat next to mine, Sebastian works on.

“Phone away as soon as we get there,” he promises. “Then I’m all yours.”

I constrict at the prospect. Back in New York we have precious little time to ourselves, what with housekeepers, cleaners, and personal assistants. I do not relish the thought of what our *quality* time might entail out in the middle of nowhere.

It’s a bumpy landing on the ice-gritted runway of Kiruna Airport, and we taxi straight to the small red bunker of a terminal, no bigger than a convenience store.

The cabin doors are opened, and a wall of icy air rolls down the aisle as if a freezer chest has been pulled ajar. I shiver and pull my city coat tight as we descend the rickety metal staircase, my breath fogging thick in the air. Our small party makes its way gingerly across the snowy slush of the tarmac to the red building.

Baggage reclaimed, we spot our names scrawled onto a dry-erase board

held by a large man in a thick animal-skin coat, its subtle embroidery intricate, a bright red neckerchief about his neck.

“Mr. Cole?” he asks, his accent thick. He smiles as we approach. “Your flight was good?”

“Krasta, right?” Sebastian asks, a hand outstretched. “Good to meet you.”

The large man chuckles as they shake hands. “Krasta, yes. Your pronunciation is very good. American visitors cannot often get this right first time.”

Sebastian gives him a laugh of acknowledgment.

Krasta turns the high beam of his attention to me. “And you must be Mrs. Cole? It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He takes my cold hand in his warm one and shakes it with as much vigor as he did Sebastian’s. “You are going to have a magical time here, I think, ma’am. Very magical.”

As Krasta leads us out of the terminal and toward a large black SUV, Sebastian has a quiet word in his ear. I do not hear.

“A surprise?” Krasta exclaims, turning to me, an eyebrow raised. “You did not know you’d be coming here? In that case I will have to bring you up to speed on my hometown. This is certainly not Stockholm up here.”

When we reach the SUV, he pops the trunk and hands me and Sebastian large padded snow coats and pairs of snow boots. “You can put these on in the car,” Krasta tells us cheerfully. “We have ski pants for you too, but this is fine for now.”

I slip into the warmth of the SUV and gratefully pull on the downy coat as Sebastian slides in beside me.

“Are you happy?” Sebastian asks, his eyes locked with mine. Reflex takes over, and I let a smile bloom across my features.

“So happy,” I tell him, and he leans back into his seat, satisfied.

Then his phone rings. He pulls it from his pocket, eyeing the number before sighing. “I have to take this. I’m sure he’ll keep you amused.” Sebastian grins, indicating Krasta loading the bags into the trunk behind us. For a while I listen to Seb’s low telephone murmur, hoping for clues as to why we are here or when we will return, but the talk is strictly medical.

Beyond the windows, as we drive, expanses of snow open up around us. The light here is caught in a perpetual golden hour, the white of the permafrost

throwing the world into crisp focus.

“So I will tell you about Kiruna,” Krasta says over Sebastian’s call. “Kiruna is being moved,” he tells me. “The whole city. Did you know this?” He checks my expression in the rearview before continuing. “The town was built on top of the Kiruna mine—that is why there is anything out here. Kiruna is the largest iron ore mine in the world. It’s beneath us, right now, under these roads, under the houses. But the town is sinking into those excavated caverns, scooped out from the inside.”

Scooped out from the inside. Sebastian has brought me out here to test me. To test if I really have stopped fighting. He could do anything out here to force that revelation, and no one would hear or see a thing if it went wrong. I suppress a shudder.

“New Kiruna is two miles east, a brand-new town. The oldest houses, the church, important buildings are being moved intact, on trucks, lorries.”

“That must be so strange for you,” I respond. “Have you lived here all your life, Krasta?” I’m keen to unearth as much as I can about my new environment.

“Yes. My people are Sámi. We are native to Sápmi. Lapland. We have been here always. The ore mine only came in the 1800s. We were here long before that, fishing, hunting, herding reindeer. For a while there was no place for us—craft, ritual, the old ways. Tourism keeps our culture alive now. But you will see soon, the Sámi way. We are almost there. The light is fading.”

He’s right. Outside the car window the sun has set already, sending the white world into murky twilight, the snow sparkling like diamond dust in the half light.

Krasta turns off the main road, and we bump down onto a snow-covered track. I feel the tire chains beneath us dig in and gain traction. Ahead the route ends, blocked by trees, through which I can pick out the soft glow of lights in the forest. We slow to a stop.

“Best to change into your ski pants now,” Krasta tells me before twisting in his seat to face Sebastian, who pauses his call. “Everything is set, Mr. Cole. If there is a problem, you have my number. The trip out there takes a while, but there is food first. This is where I leave you,” he says, finally turning back to me.

Ski pants pulled over my own clothes, snow boots securely fastened, I slip from the warmth of the SUV. The cold hits with a tight sting in my nostrils as the blood vessels constrict. I exhale sharply at the pinch, the vapor

in my breath crystallizing instantly, creating airborne glitter in the SUV's high beams.

"It's negative fifteen," Krasta says, watching me. "Tonight will be negative thirty, but you will be tucked up warm by then."

I wonder.

I scan the snowy forest surrounding us. It's beautiful, but it could not be more isolated and inhospitable. I have no idea where we are going, but I know we are already far from the nearest town.

Beyond the SUV's headlights, I see a figure in the forest. As I move to get a closer look, I see it is another Sámi man standing beside a sleigh and two snorting reindeer.

"Timo will take you for a Sámi meal now. The lodge is a long trek . . . It's good to eat first." He looks to me. "Try the lingonberry wine. It will warm you up from the inside." He winks, disappearing behind the tinted glass of the SUV before pulling away.

From the warm glow in the trees, an older voice calls, the accent thicker than Krasta's. "Come. This way. Come."

Sebastian takes my hand and leads me into the darkened forest, still continuing with the low murmur of his call. Even out here on the edge of the world, we are still reachable, which perhaps is a good thing. Above us, through breaks in the fir trees, I spot the stars, clearer and sharper than I have seen in my life, electric in the crisp night sky. As we draw closer to Timo and the snorting heat of the animals beside him, I feel Sebastian's eyes on me to gauge my reaction. Lapland, snow, reindeers, a sleigh. I let my eyes crease in enjoyment.

As we approach, Timo looks up from feeding the reindeer from a large sack. He waves us on toward an animal-skin tent wordlessly, the delicious aroma of warm cooked meat wafting out to us.

As we creak through the snow, Sebastian's hand releases mine. He needs to finish his call; he gestures for me to go in ahead. Grateful for a few more moments alone, I slip into the glowing structure.

The tent is warmer than I could have imagined. At its center, a small indigenous-looking firepit crackles with flames, and the scent of food bubbling on a skillet above it is mouthwatering as smoke rises out of a small opening in the tent's peak. A young woman in her twenties looks up as I enter. She smiles warmly, her cheeks plump and wind-chafed.

"Please, come. Sit." She beckons, indicating the downy reindeer hides

covering the floor opposite her. “It is getting cold out there already. But this will warm you up. There is another coming?” She looks toward the opening of the tent.

“He’ll just be a minute,” I answer apologetically. “He’s on a work call.”

She seems not to hear me, or to care that he isn’t here. A weight slowly eases from me as she gives another soft smile. “We will start without him,” she says. She unwraps a linen parcel warming on the stones surrounding the fire to reveal four warm flatbreads. She selects one for me, then loads it with warm meat from the skillet. “Tunnbröd and reindeer meat. Sámi recipe.” She smiles, handing me the open wrap on a square of bright red linen. As I take the food from her, she scoops a dollop of what looks like jelly out of an unlabeled jar, dropping it on top of my meal. “Something sweet. Cloudberry jam. Now eat, eat, before it cools,” she encourages me with a wave of her hands. “It is a long journey. Very cold. You need food as much as the reindeer.”

Her words remind me that I haven’t eaten properly since we left New York. My stomach groans loudly as the aromas hit me full-on, and without even attempting to stop myself, I gorge myself on the hot, juicy meat enveloped in soft bread.

Lost in a reverie, I do not notice Sebastian has joined us until he crouches to sit beside me. I raise my eyebrows in apology for having started without him, but he has already looked away, smiling at the young woman, who puts aside her own food to prepare his. After a few more minutes, Timo completes our party, and the four of us eat in reverential silence, our only concern satiating our hunger.

At some point the young woman begins to speak again, seemingly to no one in particular, her tone soft. It’s a story, begun without fanfare or introduction. A Sámi myth.

A clever goddess outsmarts a tribe of malevolent Stallo—giants. She makes them believe she is helping them find their way, then throws a torch over a cliff edge, calling for the Stallo to follow. Tied together so as not to lose their way, the Stallo all fall to their deaths.

If only all predators were so easily fooled. The story is simplistic, archaic, but something at its heart warms me almost as much as the food.

Timo pours hot wine into tin cups, and Sebastian lets me take one when offered. The steaming alcohol sends waves of heat through my chest and veins.

“Lingonberry, good for the blood.” The young woman beams, sipping her own hot, sweet wine. “Keeps you warm, helps you sleep.”

After a moment of listening to the fire pop and crackle, Timo stands, resolute. “We go now,” he says.

The young woman responds to him in Sámi, and Timo replies in kind.

Finally, she turns to us. “He says the lights will start soon. You must go now.” Seeming to catch my momentary confusion, she adds, “The lights. Guovssahas. Aurora borealis.” She points up toward the open portion of the tent. Above us I see only darkness and pinprick stars.

I had forgotten about the northern lights.

I don’t know if it’s the wine or everything that has happened over the past few hours—or years, even—but something inside me yawns open at the idea of seeing something so beautiful in real life. I have been preoccupied with my own shrinking world for such a long time now that I’d forgotten there’s a world outside it. I push down the emotion beginning to loosen within me. I cannot cry; I cannot crack this easily. I have a plan. A new one. And one way or another, I am getting out of this.

Out in the forest, Timo helps us into the sleigh, covering us with thick blankets and animal skins before getting up onto the driver platform to click the reindeer on into a gentle trot.

We weave through the trees, away from the glow of the tent, and I feel an ache as we leave its simplicity behind. Around us the snow, in constant motion, sparkles.

The cold seeps into my hands first, though they are deep under the blankets. I feel it prickle my feet as we break clear of the shelter of the forest. Timo slows and turns to us. “The lake. We cross,” he says, indicating a massive stretch of flat snow ahead of us. It must be at least three miles wide and more than two miles across. I would have assumed it was just open land, but knowing a frozen lake lies beneath adds a pinch of dread to its beauty. “The lodge is over there. It will be cold on the ice. We go quick. Temperature has dropped.”

Cold-addled, I blink back at him, and with a crack of the reins, he sends the deer barreling forward onto the frozen ice.

We’re flying across the snow, the cold biting into our faces, when suddenly something sends my gaze shooting up. I just miss whatever it was,

the ghost of something high above us. Seb follows my gaze, but there is nothing there.

Halfway across the vast expanse of the lake, I catch it again in my periphery. My eyes fly up, and the sky is alive, swirling like water. A glow of deep emerald pushes to the surface. Moving light, like airborne bioluminescent sea creatures—a wisp, a tendril.

I hear Timo call back to us, “Lights, you see?” But I cannot tear my eyes from it to answer as the sleigh flies on. The sky is marbled with moving streaks of jade, lime, and ultraviolet as if the wind were blowing it. The night air’s on fire.

Sebastian squeezes my hand beneath the sleigh blankets, and the spell breaks, the magic dissipating.

I remember where I am, who I am with.

At the edge of the lake, the reindeer scramble up the slope, and we disappear back into the shelter of a forest. Through the branches above, I can still make out the motion and color of the sky. Until I notice another light ahead, the glow of a building coming into focus between the trees.

It is a glass structure, the inside of which is completely visible from the forest. As we near it, slowing, I can make out the lick of flames in a log burner within, soft plush furnishings, and luxurious Scandinavian design. I see our bags on the porch, and the tracks of a snowmobile leading away into the darkness.

This is where we are staying. A glass cabin in the woods, miles from anyone. This is no city break. And I have no idea how long we will be out here, alone, uninterrupted.

At the door, Timo hands Sebastian the key, and with a nod takes his leave from us. I watch him jingle the reindeer on and slip from the clearing as Sebastian carries our bags into the cabin.

He calls me from within. After a moment of silence alone in the snow, I follow.

The glass cabin is as beautiful inside as out, a dazzling prison. The darkened glass reflects back its warmth, and an open spiral staircase leads up to a mezzanine level that contains only a thick double duvet-covered bed. In a different life, heaven.

My eye is drawn again to the ceiling, which, like the walls of the cabin, is made entirely of glass. Through that glass the aurora borealis rolls and curdles in endless permutations. I can’t help but feel it is a sign, as if nature

itself can see and reflect the contents of my head.

His arms loop around my waist as soon as the door is shut, and he begins to unzip my snowsuit. A sharp jolt of arousal stabs through me, my body betraying me, too well trained now to know any better. His hand slips into the warmth of my jacket and under my sweater, finding my breast, his cold skin making me shudder with sickening pleasure.

I do not cry out as his mouth finds mine and he hungrily takes what he wants. I let him strip me from my clothes, thinking fleetingly of the glass walls and who might lie beyond, in the vast, unknowable darkness. Naked, he takes me in, satisfied I am his. I have learned that it is easier to just let this happen than to face the harsh consequences that result from disobedience. The sanctions, the curtailing of liberties.

As he turns me around and pushes me firmly against the cool glass of the cabin, I let my gaze rise to the sky. I let him fuck me, as much as I can *let* anything happen these days. One of his hands grasps hard around my throat, just loose enough not to leave a mark. He needs to know he has control over me even as he loses control now.

After he finishes, I let him kiss me before I head, clothes in hand, to the cabin's shower room to clean myself.

I check my underwear for blood spots, but there is still nothing there. My period is three days late now. The bathroom door is not locked—I am not allowed to lock things—but I will be safe for a few minutes at least. I slip my hand into my wool coat, finding the hole I have made in its lining and the tiny hard plastic object hidden within. I wriggle it out of the small slit. A pregnancy test. I did a test in New York yesterday, but it showed a negative. Too early to know.

I sit on the toilet and slip the stick into the flow of my urine, my eyes straying to a particularly valuable- and intricate-looking ammonite objet d'art on the shelf beside the sink. Its clarity and detail are enough to tell me it must be a collector's piece, gathered and placed here, at the end of the earth, by some price-on-application interior design firm. But it's beautiful, in spite of that, the ancient creature inside as old as time itself yet as tangible as the stone surrounding it.

I used to want a child with him more than anything, but now I do not. He took away my birth control after the conservatorship.

In my hand the pregnancy test's second window darkens, a blue cross forming. I have never had a problem getting pregnant.

I have had to end two pregnancies since the conservatorship began. Preemptive abortion pills as soon as I am as much as a week late. Anonymous, sterile centers that ask enough questions but never too many. I have to stay vigilant; I have to act before things begin.

But he knows my cycle now. It's harder to lie.

I hear him moving about in the cabin beyond the door as I slip the test back into the lining of my coat. The coat can go back into my case now until we leave here, whenever that may be.

A few months after the conservatorship went through, he took me to a retreat in the Nevada desert. We stayed there in a climate-controlled compound for three weeks while he took a sabbatical. It was hell. I kicked up such a stink he was forced to take me home and put me on a short hold in the hospital. That was the last time we traveled.

I cannot stay here for three weeks. I cannot let this embryo grow inside me. He will figure out that I am pregnant, and I will cease to have options.

No. Stockholm or not, I might never get a chance like this again.

I think of the Klonopin I have been palming and saving, hidden in my makeup bag. Enough to knock out a fully grown man. If I go, I should go tonight. I should take his wallet; I know his PIN. If I can make it back across the lake, back to that tarmac road, I can hitchhike to the main town. I can find the train station. I can buy a ticket to Stockholm. I can carry out my original plan.

Run. Slip into the shadows. I will have to give up my name and history, but I can throw myself on their welfare system and hope that it will catch me. It is the only way I can be sure of regaining my freedom.

I have to let go of Olivia Cole. She is caught in a trap there is no way out of, and while I know I will lose everything this way, there is precious little left anyway.

Some nights I lie awake dreaming of the life I could have if I weren't Olivia. The idea of working in a coffee shop, with nowhere else to be—the freedom of it a balm.

Only one good thing has come of this hell: I no longer have the complicated desires I once had. In a sense he might just have cured me.

Tomorrow I could wake up free in a hostel in Stockholm, with no one to be but myself. The idea sends a shiver down my spine as I slip into the hot flow of the shower.

I watch him sip his wine by the fire. I've put it in his wine before. Only enough to make him tired, when things have been particularly unbearable. You can't taste it over the tannin. I know, I've tried. He gulps back the last of it and adds another log to the fire before pouring us more. He yawns luxuriously as he sits back down.

An hour later, I lie in the quiet darkness of the mezzanine level, tucked between crisp sheets, his warm body next to me. The occasional pop and crackle of the fire downstairs slowly burning to embers are the only sounds. I listen to his breath, how it lengthens and deepens, as I stare up at the swirling heavens above me.

Time passes on the red digital readout beneath the bedroom television. His breath is steady and slow, and his movements are calmed. High above us, the green, electric current of the sky is broiling. If I am quiet, I can do this. And God knows I have gotten good at being quiet.

Silently, I gather as many layers as I can from my suitcase. Downstairs, I dress for the subzero temperatures.

My ears attuned to the level above, I take all the currency I can find from Sebastian's wallet and slip two of his personal credit cards into the pocket of my snow jacket.

I am not yet fully dressed. If he were to wake, I could quickly head to the bathroom, feign a nighttime toilet trip, and try again later.

Beneath the sink I find a small battery-operated flashlight, and then I fill a canteen with water and tuck some bread, cheese, and fruit into a bag before gathering up my thick hat and ski gloves.

Finally, with one last check back in the direction of Sebastian's sleeping form, I open the front door with incredible care and slip out into the arctic chill, my clothes in hand.

I pull the door closed behind me, and the feeling its muffled click gives me is as close to euphoria as I have ever felt. I quickly slide into my snow clothes. I need to put as much distance between me and this cabin as I can, as fast as I can. This is the danger zone. I think of the times I have tried to escape from our Manhattan home in the night, only to be escorted back by a concerned doorman, or given up by a maid, or caught by Seb himself. If I can just get clear of the cabin without waking him, I stand half a chance of doing this.

Snow coat, ski pants, and boots on, I grab everything else and run, my long strides muffled by the snow. Ten minutes in, I stumble to a stop at the

edge of the lake.

Timo's tracks continue on, easy to follow across the vast expanse of ice.

I feel a fizz of fear stepping out onto the lake's ice, even though I know it held our weight, and more, just hours ago. But away from the cover of forest, there is nothing to protect me from the elements or shield me from view. If anyone else were out here, I would be a single point of focus in a sea of white.

I cast my eyes up as I jog, the backlit sky still flipping and squirming high above me. Then I feel the tickle of snowflakes on my cheeks. I pick up my pace, but the air is now full of them building into fat clusters as the flurry gains momentum. On the ground, Timo's tracks begin to disappear.

I burst into a run, racing toward the other side of the lake, squinting into the white to keep sight of the fast-blurring sleigh lines. But as the snow swirls and fogs around me, clogging the air, I realize I cannot outrun the disappearing tracks.

I pick a spot on the opposite bank and plow on toward it, disorientation a very real concern in the now-blinding white.

When I finally reach the tree-lined bank, I collapse, grateful and exhausted, on a sheltered dry patch beneath a tree. I let my heaving breath catch and settle, tipping out the contents of my bag to quickly refuel my shuddering body. I know that failure invariably comes from panicking. I need to stay calm and wait until this snow passes or I will get lost out here.

After a while, the snow stops completely, and I stumble back to the lake's edge to search again for signs of Timo along the tree line. But all traces are gone.

Then, in the distance, beyond the water's edge, I notice something twinkling between the trees. A house with a thin stream of smoke issuing from its chimney. There are people out here. Help, perhaps? If I play it right.

I set off, though the little voice inside me insists that somehow the house ahead is the cabin I have just run from—as if I were stuck forever in an inescapable hall of mirrors.

But as I approach, I see it is not the glass cabin; it is a wooden lodge, curtains drawn over glowing windows. A family of snow boots lines the stoop, and the scent of dinner still hangs in the air. I pause on the wooden steps and consider my story—*I have a work emergency back at home, and I need to get to Kiruna, get a return flight, as soon as possible.* Generic, plausible. Lies tend to be elaborate, oddly specific. I walk up to the door and

knock.

After a moment's hiatus, a large woman opens the door and stares at me, bewildered. She scans the tree line behind me, clearly hoping for more information.

I take a breath and speak.

After a beat she nods, hand raised, as she disappears back into the house, returning with a gaunt man. He raises an eyebrow. "Tourist?" he asks in broken English. They must be Sámi too.

"Yes. I need to get to Kiruna. *Kiruna*. You understand? Can you help?" I ask.

He frowns. "Kiruna. Now?"

I nod apologetically, fumbling some cash out of my ski pants.

"No, no," he says with a sigh. "Kiruna, OK." A thumbs-up. I watch as he slips on snow boots and a thick coat. "Come," he tells me.

Behind the cabin, he pulls back the tarpaulin cover on an old Volvo pickup with heavy snow-chained tires.

He pops his door and indicates mine. "Kiruna," he says definitively.

As we pull away, I see his wife talking animatedly into her phone on the front porch, her breath fogging in the air. I wonder who she is talking to, but I refuse to dwell on that; I cannot control her actions.

As we bump along the dirt track, the man's phone bleats to life. He answers in Sámi, the call seemingly casual and incidental, though I have no way of knowing. Either way, he does not slow or deviate from our plan.

After thirty minutes on the dirt track, we finally reach the tarmac of the main road. Streetlights begin to appear as we continue on, then other cars, then buildings, and finally people, bundled up and out walking. Civilization. The sharp splinter of hope inside me blossoms into something softer, something more radiating as it seeps into everything I see beyond the car windows. The world, freedom, so close. A bed of my own. Time to think, to breathe. I can almost feel the uncharted days stretching out before me.

The man's indicators click on, and without warning, we pull off the road into a gas station.

I straighten in my seat, but he raises a hand to reassure me.

"Stay," he says gently, before getting out and jogging over to another pickup truck. I watch as he talks to someone else through their window. After a beat, the person he is talking to gets out too.

I freeze as he looks back in my direction, unsure what kind of attitude I

should be adopting at this stage. Should I be wary or grateful? I can't quite remember. The new man nods, and both men now approach.

The new man is younger, in his twenties, with a soft, kind face. He addresses me in English. "Jarri says you want Kiruna? An emergency? I can take you."

I study his gentle face before answering. "Um, yes, that would be so helpful. If you could? I can pay you, if you like?"

"No, no," he says graciously. "That is not necessary. Maybe petrol money?"

I nod hastily and splutter my thanks to the man who drove me this far before following my new savior to his car. Again, the little voice inside me pipes up. It tells me not to assume anything, and nerves already jangled, this time I listen. I stop myself half-in, half-out of his car.

"Did you just speak to him on the phone? Why are you taking me and not him?" I ask, questions suddenly bursting through my pinhole focus. I watch his micro-reactions, but he's hard to read. English is clearly not his first language, so there is a jarring lag to his comprehension.

"This is not Kiruna," he tells me. "This is Svappavaara. Jarri does not speak English, so he brought you to me. He didn't understand half what you said. Kiruna is the other direction, but he can't take you that far."

"Oh, OK," I say. "But you'll take me to Kiruna? There's a train station in Kiruna, right?" The new man looks at me with a hint of concern. "I need to get a train back to Stockholm," I explain. "Tonight, if I can."

He looks away from me for a moment and starts his engine. "But you're American. Why do you have an emergency in Stockholm?"

"I don't—it's quicker to get a train to Stockholm tonight and fly back home from there. There are no flights from Kiruna until tomorrow," I lie. I can only hope he doesn't know the flight schedule for Kiruna Airport.

He nods his understanding. "Yeah, I can take you to the station, if that's what you need."

There's a boredom to his tone that makes me trust him. I slam my door and belt up.

He's right, of course. It would be easier to wait and fly, but I can't fly. Even if I had taken my passport from the cabin, it would be useless under the conservatorship. Flight restrictions flag on my name if it is ever used to book tickets, and legal consent from my guardian is required to secure any passage.

"You have an onward flight from Stockholm booked already?" the new

man adds after a moment.

“No, not yet,” I tell him as he pulls us out onto the main road. “I need to see how quickly I can get there first.”

“Makes sense,” he says after a moment of thought. “I’ll check with a friend about the station, if trains are running this late.”

He makes a call as we drive. Another conversation in Sámi that I do not understand. When he hangs up, he turns to me, fortified in the knowledge he has gained, his voice brighter. “Yes, my friend says there is a Stockholm train tonight. You can still make it, I think. It’s a small station, but it is open all night. I’ll take you there now.”

I let myself sink back into the heated passenger seat, and as the buildings glide past, my eyes must slowly begin to flicker shut.

I wake with a start as the car slows, beyond my window only darkness. This isn’t a train station. I bolt upright in my seat, making the man beside me flinch.

“Where are we?” I demand. “This isn’t Kiruna station, is it?”

He looks terrified. “Um, no, I’m sorry.” He raises a hand from the wheel in surrender. “I just . . . You’re the Americans staying in the glass house. I spoke to Krasta. He told me to take you back.” He looks out the windshield, embarrassed, his voice lowered to a mumble. “They said that you aren’t well. It didn’t seem right to do what you said. I’m sorry.”

My eyes flash to the cabin looming into view through the trees ahead, the harsh angles of it glowing against the night.

He’s taking me right back to where I started. Right back to Sebastian. I’m not going to get away. I’m not going to be free.

Desperately, I fumble for the car door, but it will not open. It’s locked. Sebastian must have explained everything to Krasta when he organized the trip. He knew there was a chance I might try something like this, even after six months of docility.

A sharp burst of rage explodes inside me as we pull up to the cabin and I realize Sebastian will always be one step ahead of me.

I lunge over to the driver’s side, scrambling for the central locking system, but he blocks my way. I claw and tussle to get past this man, but he is bigger than me, and as much as I rail, I achieve nothing. Sebastian’s word will always trump mine, and the more I fight, the weaker my story becomes. I

will never be free unless he chooses to release me. And why would he ever do that?

Pinned back to my seat, I see now that Krasta is waiting on the porch, his expression dark, etched with concern.

A shot of terror flashes through me at the thought that he might know I have drugged Sebastian.

What if I got the dosage wrong somehow? What if Sebastian is lying lifeless beneath the thick sheets? And Krasta knows it.

A shiver ripples through me as I wonder what fate might befall me if I have, somehow, accidentally killed my loving, loyal, and seemingly perfect husband. But then, for the first time in our two years of marriage, something clicks. The pieces of my life slowly fall into place.

As far as the world is concerned, I am a danger to myself and others. I am not a competent adult. I am not legally responsible for my own actions—that is how Sebastian has rigged the system. But there is a flaw in his plan, a simple but fundamental flaw. Because if I have accidentally killed Sebastian, I am not legally responsible for it. He made sure of that fact himself.

As a psychiatrist, I signed enough court affidavits to know the legal power of diminished capacity. The one prohibiting thought that always stopped me doing something extreme is that I'm not actually crazy enough to do something like that. But here I am.

I have a court-ordered diagnosis of diminished capacity. If I am incapable of choosing where I go, or what I do, or with whom, then I sure as shit am not responsible for what I do when I get there. If my life is someone else's problem, then so is what I do.

The man beside me turns off the car engine, signaling a quick thumbs-up to Krasta through the windshield.

I watch, heart in throat, as Krasta turns from us and knocks on the cabin door. God knows I want Seb dead, but I have never wanted to be the one to do it. We all wait, in the stillness of the clearing, for Sebastian to appear.

The silence in the car is thick. No one comes to the door. Krasta's gaze flickers back to us, concern writ large. He raises his fist to knock again, but as he does, the cabin door swings open.

My breath catches. Sebastian stands bleary eyed in the doorway. I did not overdose him. The amount was perfect—a thick, deep sleep, nothing more.

I do not hear the conversation between them as they stare out at me,

their gazes intense and full of concern, but I can see something hardening in Sebastian as what I have done sinks in.

I am unloaded from the car, an escaped convict returned to my captor while my almost saviors avoid my gaze and direct their words to Sebastian.

Back inside the cabin I listen in silence as the sounds of Krasta's snowmobile and the car recede into the forest, fear rising like floodwater inside me in anticipation of what will come next. Sebastian shuts the cabin door and watches me carefully, and I know I am right: something very bad is coming. I steel myself.

After a moment he speaks: "What you did will set us back, Olivia. I hope you see that?"

I do not speak. There is little point; he will do as he wants regardless.

He makes his way over to me, lifting my chin so that I am forced to look into his eyes. I see the anger there, the controlled rage, because he is better than that. He is stronger.

His touch becomes gentle, sickeningly paternal. "You haven't been taking all your medication. The pills are there for your own good. You know that." His thumb brushes my lip, taunting me to pull away, but I do not. He slowly pushes his thumb into my mouth, forcing it open, but I resist. He stops; then, holding my chin in place, he pulls back his other hand and slaps me hard across my face. The strike takes my breath away, the shock of it. He has never hit me before. I reel from the sharp sting and ache of bruising bone. He is strong.

"Did you want to hurt me?" he asks. "Is that what you wanted to do here? Because the only person you've actually hurt is yourself. You see that, don't you? Now things will have to change. I think you've gotten used to me playing nice, but you don't respond to nice, do you?"

He pulls me toward him and I lose my footing. Of all the things I thought he might do, physical punishment was not one of them. But we are miles from the nearest town, and we could be out here for weeks. Bruises heal. Evidence fades.

With blinding clarity I realize it might not matter if the evidence fades. I am, after all, a suicide risk. If something very bad were to happen to me, he might just get away with it. For the first time in a long time, fear makes my legs weak, and I stumble as he drags me deeper into the room, pinning me against a steel beam.

"We're alone out here," he tells me. "No one is coming for you, and we

can stay here as long as it takes. But you will stop fighting me. You will learn to be good if it kills you. No more acting. You will get what you're given, and you will thank me for it." He brings his fist up hard into my stomach, and I fold onto the floor, spluttering for breath.

A sharp kick comes to my side, and I reel away from him as words jerk from me in self-preservation. "I'm pregnant, Seb. Stop. Please stop."

And just like that he does. I know him too well.

After a moment, he lifts me from the floor and hoists me up onto the nearest armchair, pushing my hair from my eyes.

"Look at me," he demands, and falteringly, I do. "You are, aren't you?" he says after studying my face. He lets out a little laugh. "You are. That's why you ran? You got scared."

I do not speak—there is blood in my mouth—but I nod. A docile, obedient nod.

He sits down opposite me, lost in the moment. He will be a father, finally. He has won, he thinks. I am beaten, and now he thinks he will have every piece of me.

When he looks at me again, it is with a strange kind of love. This is working. Whatever I am doing is working.

"I forgive you," he tells me. "We both know what your hormones can do. We need to take better care of you, don't we? You just got scared. Who wouldn't be scared, after what happened last time? Change can be frightening; the future can be frightening. But I'm here now, and I am going to take such good care of you. Of both of you." He seems to see my fresh bruises, the blood on my lips, for the first time. "Go clean yourself up," he tells me softly, pointing toward the bathroom.

I rise with difficulty and head for the bathroom, playing into my injuries, playing the poor pregnant, unstable wife.

I close the door behind me and take in my tearstained, swollen face in the bathroom mirror. I don't entirely recognize the woman I see there.

He has never attacked me before, but we have never been this isolated before. Things have stepped up a gear, and the rules have changed again. It's funny, but even after everything, I never thought it would come to this, that I would become this woman, that he would make me her. But no one begins a game thinking they will lose, do they? And what would it mean to lose a game like this?

I'm pretty sure I would rather cheat than wait to find out.

I am not going back to New York. I am not having his child. I am not staying in this marriage.

Beside the sink rests the beautifully preserved ammonite objet d'art, the swirls and crenulations of the prehistoric sea creature solid, mathematical, and pleasing. I stare at the long-dead limbic life-form—we all do what we can to survive. I recall my thoughts from earlier, outside the cabin, how I will never outrun the hold he has over me—diminished capacity. That is what he wanted. That is what he got.

The splinter of hope I first felt out in the snow glows back to life inside me, slow at first, then brighter.

God knows I don't want to end up in a facility, but if I do, I can play by their rules. I know how the system works from the inside; I know what they'll need to see to let me out. The chains he's used to bind me all this time can be used to set me free.

Carefully, I pick up the heavy ammonite and feel its reassuring weight in my hand. I am not stronger than him, I know that, but I studied general medicine for as long as he did before specializing. I know where to aim on a human skull to make it quick, to avoid a struggle. It can be done in an instant—and after playing my part so well, after bending to him over and over, I know he will let me get close enough.

I chose to start down this road, but I didn't know it would lead me to the bruised and bloodied woman in the mirror. I didn't think I could become that woman—I thought I had the measure of the game I was playing, of who I was. But somewhere along the way, I lost my bearings.

I try to imagine what I would have said to the woman reflected in the glass if she'd shown up at my office years ago.

I would have told her that no one is coming to help her, that she has to do something to make him stop. But then . . . she already knows that. Finally, she knows that.

I tell her that she cannot die out here, that I will not let her, and manage an almost encouraging smile.

She gives me a grateful nod.

I slip my smooth palm-size weapon into a pocket of my ski pants, take a last look at my patient in the mirror, and swing open the bathroom door.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © Ori Jones

Catherine Steadman is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Something in the Water*, *Mr. Nobody*, *The Disappearing Act*, and *The Family Game*. Catherine is also a professional actress who lives and works in London.

Catherine Steadman

NEW YORK TIMES
bestselling author of
SOMETHING IN THE WATER

THE FAMILY GAME

A Novel

A rich, eccentric family. A time-honored tradition. Or a lethal game of survival? One woman finds out what it really takes to join the 1% in this riveting psychological thriller from the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Something in the Water*, *Mr. Nobody*, and *The Disappearing Act*.

Harry is a novelist on the brink of stardom; Edward, her husband-to-be, is seemingly perfect. In love and freshly engaged, their bliss is interrupted by the reemergence of the Holbecks, Edward's eminent family and the embodiment of American old money. For years, they've dominated headlines and pulled society's strings, and Edward left them all behind to forge his own path. But there are eyes and ears everywhere. It was only a matter of time before they were pulled back in . . .

After all, even though he's long severed ties with his family, Edward is set to inherit it all. Harriet is drawn to the glamour and sophistication of the Holbecks, who seem to welcome her with open arms, but everything changes when she meets Robert, the inescapably magnetic head of the family. At their first meeting, Robert slips Harry a cassette tape, revealing a shocking confession that sets the inevitable game in motion.

What is it about Harry that made him give her that tape? A thing that has the power to destroy everything? As she ramps up her quest for the truth, she must endure the Holbecks' savage Christmas traditions all the while knowing that losing this game could be deadly.