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BARBARA O'NEAL, bestselling author of When We Believed in Mermaids

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JESSICA GUERRIERI

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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JESSICA GUERRIERI



Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

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CHAPTER 1

here's a phantom life that runs parallel to the one I'm currently living, like a shadow. That version of me is childless and, therefore, untethered to the O'Connor family. I think of her whenever I'm clipping my two-year-old's toenails, and the little half-moons splinter off in different directions, and I find myself scouring the floor so I'm not stepping on discarded pieces of my youngest daughter's body when I'm barefoot at three o'clock in the morning and need to pee. I'm confident my shadow self has already circled the globe, only to have landed someplace tropical like Costa Rica—beholden to simply the movement of the sea. Sometimes I wave, but she's surfing and cannot wave back.

"Look what I found to bring to Grandma's for our shelves!" My daughter Joni's face lights up like a Christmas tree. She is my oldest, the first grandchild: a unicorn of a being, always golden from time spent on the beach. She appears more ethereal than human. Joni's very existence has made my presence tolerable to my mother-in-law, Christine. As if Lucas and I made Joni just for her.

I glance back and take note of an almost completely purple

hermit crab shell resting in the palm of her hand.

"Shelves?" I ask her. It rings a bell, but I almost always mentally check out whenever Christine is involved.

"You know, we collect shells, but, like, perfect ones, for the display cases she has upstairs. She lets me arrange them by category or however I want."

I can picture it now, Christine biting the inside of her cheeks as she reluctantly doles out home decor privileges.

"Wow, lovey. That's a high honor," I say, removing a strand of hair that has caught on the corner of my mouth.

We are driving to one of the last remaining beaches that hasn't been overrun by tourists. It's a little way's walk from the road, and we have to park in a neighborhood where doing so is frowned upon for anyone who is not a resident of Half Moon Bay. I've brought along my painting supplies, though I doubt I'll be able to focus with Dottie, at age two, still heavily in the eating sand phase.

"I told Grandma to meet us here. We are on a mission to find a whole sand dollar."

"Oh, you did? Great," I say as sincerely as I can muster. It would be nice if Christine could keep the kids occupied while I work.

Christine is already parked, standing next to her driver's side door with her beach gear in hand. I remain in the car with Reid, my eight-year-old, and Dottie, waiting to channel all the willpower I'll need for the next several hours. I watch as Christine and Joni embrace. Christine removes one of her signature scarves from around her neck and drapes it around Joni. Their movements are effortlessly in sync, which has baffled me from the beginning—a dance they started the day Joni was born.

When I arrived home from the hospital a few days after

her birth, Lucas insisted we were ready for visitors. Feeling the need to busy myself, I staged a scene that only Christine would manage to believe exists inside the realm of motherhood. With soft music playing and the low morning light peeking in through dusty rose—colored curtains, I held a swaddled Joni while sitting in the rocking chair that had once belonged to Christine. She'd had someone deliver it to us with a note attached that read: *Being a mother is the greatest blessing of my life. I hope you feel the same.*

Even her kind gestures have hidden agendas.

I rocked, awaiting the sounds of feet on the stairs, and pondered how I was meant to share this tiny being with a family that resisted my every movement.

"If I had a camera, I'd take your picture," Christine had said as she stood in the doorway.

On the dry sand, I set up my easel slightly removed from our mountain of beach stuff while still placing myself within earshot of the kids. Christine and Joni have already ventured down to the water to look for shells. Only two have made the cut and are worthy of the home display. Reid has Dottie near the surf, and they are playing chase with the waves.

"My mother and I used to explore the tide pools after school along this same beach. We'd collect everything from shells to hermit crabs. Then we'd put them in vases of sea glass and use them as centerpieces at The Cove. Anything special or worthy enough would go inside the trinket boxes in our home. The same boxes I have now," Christine says to Joni, her eyes fixating on the waves. Then, drawing her focus back to her granddaughter, she adds, "The circle doesn't have to be a sphere," as she runs her finger along the edges of a sand dollar. "But there can't be any cracks." She holds it to her ear and shakes it gently. "Bonus points for teeth. The hole in the back is its mouth." She pauses. "Sand dollars were always her favorite."

Christine doesn't often talk about her mother unless she's sharing about the family restaurant they owned and operated for two generations, The Cove.

"What's your favorite sea creature, Grandma?" Joni asks.

"I've always liked the starfish. As a kid, I loved how it could be both hard and soft depending on whether it was in or out of the water. But these days, I appreciate it for the extra arms. They would have come in handy raising your uncles." If I were to paint Christine, I'd be strictly limited to muted pastels.

Christine goes to work laying out the picnic she brought for the kids while Joni takes extreme care carving out seats for her and her grandmother within the sand. She uses the excess to create a solid backing, especially for Christine's "chair," and then finally covers them completely with towels. She has positioned them side by side so she and Christine can align themselves like two little old ladies at a beauty parlor.

Their placement reminds me of the time Amy and I snuck away for pedicures on the day she lost her first pregnancy. There is something poignant about my sister-in-law's unshakable grit, and being chosen as the object of her unwavering attention, though with her baby arriving so soon, I know I'll need to learn how to share her.

The sea is flat today. The waves break at the shore, and so far, Reid and Dottie have only been caught up around Dottie's mid-thigh. Fixing my gaze on the water plays tricks on my eyes. Each dark point that crests upward deceives me into thinking something is splashing mysteriously just at the surface—only to sink back down and pop up closer to shore. I watch one spot in particular for over a minute, convinced I see a silky brown head, only for it to disappear and never breach the surface again.

Wanting to include myself in their world, I call over to Joni, "Look! There's a seal." I point to where it was, but there are no landmarks to direct her sight. Joni lifts her head briefly but lazily rests it on Christine's shoulder, content not to indulge in what I am offering.

Joni begins biting her nails. "How did you know you liked Grandpa?" she asks in a voice that's so sweet and soft I almost don't recognize it.

Christine reaches over and pulls her hand away from her mouth, chuckling a little. "Some days I'm not entirely sure I like your grandpa."

Joni lets out a laugh, and I almost do too. Christine's sense of humor is usually limited to when she indulges herself with a single glass of wine on Sundays.

"Grandpa was friends with my best friend's boyfriend. We met for a setup. That's when friends want to introduce you both to see if there's a spark."

Her response doesn't answer the question, so I am genuinely curious to see if Joni will accept it. Joni looks thoughtfully puzzled. Her eyes change shape as her lips form into a thin, crooked pout that moves her nose ever so slightly to the left. It's an expression that is woven into her identity; she's been making it since birth. She puts a grape in her mouth and starts to chew slowly.

"What'd you mean, spark?" Joni asks. Christine has scratched the surface of something.

"When you like someone, you can just feel it. Inside—it makes you feel warm and happy."

Joni is nodding like she understands, though, at age ten,

I'm not sure she does.

Christine lowers her voice a little. "Do you feel that way about someone?"

Joni snuggles closer to Christine, placing her head back on her shoulder. I notice her whisper something directly into her grandma's ear. While my interest was initially piqued, in their secrets they have drawn the blinds down around them. Christine pulls Joni directly onto her lap as if she were a baby. Joni's four limbs cross every which way, and they are a tangled mess of sand and giggles.

On that morning of Christine's first visit when we brought Joni home, I reluctantly managed to relinquish my baby into her arms, even though it felt like the very act would tear the seams we'd spent the past nine months carefully sewing together. The hum of Christine's adoration was palpable. For a moment, the three of us were all touching at once. With Christine's unabashed tenderness, I sensed a pull, not a break, and something passed through us that told me exactly what I needed to know: Joni was her grandchild. No matter what I had done in my past, the secrets I would need to keep, this baby belonged in this family, even if I would always feel like an outsider.

I pretend to be extremely interested in my work, detailing the slickness of the seal's head that will be a focal point of the piece, which I've made too large and entirely too obvious. The bitterness of the pill I swallow as an O'Connor is that for all of Christine's many flaws, her grown sons have chosen to live only minutes from her and my father-in-law, George. By choosing this version instead of my childless shadow self, I have to bear witness to moments like my daughter whispering away her most precious secrets. I wonder how much strain our seam can sustain.



Once we have packed up the car to head home, Christine and I linger near the trunk. I can tell she's eager to say something. She has to crane her neck to catch my gaze, where she pauses as if she's locked into my orbit. Nana, my mom's mom, would say that my luminary aura draws people in. She claimed I could get a killer to reveal where all the bodies are buried. I prefer to expose confessions across a blank canvas.

It was Nana who originally helped to foster my superpower. I remember standing in her backyard, peering into the koi pond she built with her own two hands. There were seven fish, and I named them all after the seven dwarfs.

"Sleepy is extra sleepy today," I told her. The orange-andblack mammoth beast had been sulking at the bottom while his brothers wove around him.

"We all have our quiet, reflective days at the bottom of the pond," Nana explained in her infinite wisdom.

"Can we feed 'em again? I love when they nibble my fingers. It tickles," I said as my five-year-old self. I fiddled with my favorite headband that was once white but, over time, had become a dirtied beige.

"If we feed them anymore, they'll outgrow their habitat, which is fine, I suppose, but I'm hoping to keep 'em in this one as long as I possibly can."

Nana dragged over a chair, and I crawled into her lap, tucking myself beneath her chin as we watched the bright colors swirl in the reflection of the water. I remember tracing the remarkable texture along the back of her hands—how her veins protruded up along the bones that connected each finger—their pillowy softness. I tried to pinch them without squeezing so I wouldn't hurt her. I wanted to lay my body between the folds of her skin and become entombed in her forever.

I painted the image of us cupped within her palms before I left Iowa for university in California. It felt important that I leave behind a piece of me, even though I had outgrown my pond. I could never outgrow my love for her.

"Thanks for being here for the kids today so I could focus on my work," I say, genuinely grateful for Christine's help at the beach.

"You know I love that child." Christine smiles, looking at Joni in the passenger seat as if she's remembering it all over again. Her favoritism has never been subtle.

"Did you want to follow us home to see Lucas?" I'm asking, but my tone reflects no inflection to suggest I want her to do that.

"I need to get back to George. If I'm not there to feed him, he'll forget to eat." She looks up as if searching for something on top of my minivan, but then she shakes her head. "I'll be off."

"Hey, what did Joni whisper to . . . Ya know what, never mind." I can feel my face redden a little, so I turn, anxious to drive away. But as I step back she's stepping forward, intrusively entering my personal space.

"These things reveal themselves in their own way, in their own time," she says as if I should feel lucky to be gaining another nugget of wisdom from the Grand High Mother herself.

"Thanks for the advice, but raising daughters is nothing like raising sons."

"Yes, well." It's Christine's turn to flush.

Good, I think. Though my victory feels tainted somehow.

CHAPTER 2

t's not that I long for the other version of me, that shadow self, but I did believe that one day we'd happily merge. That somehow, her momentum would still be building in the background—waiting patiently for our union.

If only I were satisfied by all the things that seem to make my mother-in-law so methodically calculated, then maybe I could meld into the O'Connor mold. Take the image of Christine's home and how it mirrors the way she presents herself to the outside world. The square footage alone is massive, but even the surrounding landscape looks like it's been handpainted. With west-facing views of the ocean, I can envision her fingers forming a square as she dictates to the architect that the kitchen window must encapsulate the sinking of the sunset. She'd inquire in such a way that it would sound like she's asking his opinion, but she's making sure he knows who's in charge of the entire operation. She is the boss. She'd instigate just enough to ensure a battle to fill the empty hours without her grown sons to fawn over. When the home was complete in all its meticulous perfection, she'd invite the architect over for dinner, just so he'd have to eat his words.

Sunday family dinners have been a long-standing tradition with the O'Connors. My very first one will go down in history as the most memorable, given it was the setting of Lucas's and my surprise pregnancy announcement with Joni. This evening I sip my wine, keeping my eyes glued to the front door as I await Amy's arrival.

"They're here!" Joni announces.

Paul enters first, reaching behind to take Amy's hand. She's small and lovely, almost more belly than woman at this point.

"Amy! What are you drinking?" my father-in-law, George, asks before her feet even cross the threshold. He thrusts a glass of wine into her hand, and it sloshes onto her dress.

"Jeez, Dad! We went over this." Paul, in a swift motion, takes the glass from her.

She shakes out her dress; luckily, the wine was white and not red.

"What? Suddenly a pregnant woman can't drink?" George asks. "My mother had at least two martinis every night on doctor's orders. And look at me!"

"Yes, look at you." Christine appears out of nowhere, sweeping over to embrace Paul and then Amy.

Amy finds my eyes and squints, laughing without laughing. Already we're off to the races, and no one else in the room even noticed the sound of the starter pistol.

Amy keeps her hands on her stomach, likely to cover the stain but maybe to protectively shield the growing parts that will mark Christine's sixth grandchild. Her features, starting with her flowing brown hair, are warm except for her eyes those give away her war wounds. As she removes her coat, I scan the expansive home, somehow made crowded by a single family. I spot all three of my children and scoop Dottie up in my arms, dangling her high above the heads of impeccably dressed children as I begin making guttural moaning sounds meant to imitate the African tribal music of *The Lion King*.

Amy reaches up, grinning, to accept my sacrificial offering. She pulls Dottie down onto what's left of her lap as she buries her face in Dottie's yellow curls.

"Little Dot, I've missed you," she whispers into Dottie's delicate, perfect ear. Her breath must tickle Dottie's skin because she giggles—her whole body consumed by joy.

"Teacher Amy, sing!" Dottie commands, waiting for Amy to perform for her like she does when she's the teacher in Dottie's classroom.

"Here she is your *auntie* Amy," I correct her.

Amy shuffles Dottie off to the side and maneuvers her hands around the orb of her belly, either checking for movement or repositioning to get comfortable. Either way, she's deep in thought. I take Amy's hand, hoping Dottie and I can alleviate the weight of her worry over the baby girl she's carrying inside her. She says nothing, letting out an audible sigh as we stare into a sea of O'Connors. We both married into the same situation but under entirely different circumstances. For me, becoming an O'Connor happened by accident. For Amy, it was a welcome, purposeful change. It still feels impossible to find our footing inside such an established family. Almost immediately and without hesitation, we tethered ourselves to each other, speaking our own language of kinship.

"Hello in there, my darling," I whisper as I pretend to knock before gently resting my hand on her belly. Amy presses her lips against Dottie's cheek. I turn my attention toward the children in the room. "Hey, guys, Uncle Jack is hiding chocolate somewhere on his body. Go tickle him until he surrenders it!" All the grandchildren, including Dottie, dash in the direction of the rest of the grown-ups. Amy recognizes the trap I've set. Despite having two kids of his own, Jack acts like a dogbite victim in a pen of rottweilers as they circle him. Typically, I single Christine out as my target, but the night is still young.

"So," I say. I know, like me, she appreciates this moment by ourselves.

"So," she echoes.

I reach across Amy for my wineglass, which is nearing empty. I consider offering her what's left as a time machine, the memory transporting us back to all the hours we stayed up late together, drinking and talking. During those early days, safe within the bubble of our new alliance—taking turns shedding protective layers of skin until we were nothing but bones and hushed whispers—our secrets spilled like those last sips of wine.

I call out to my husband, Lucas, holding up my glass, and motion to him for more. He immediately makes his way toward us. Even after eleven years of marriage, my body hums with the vibration of want at merely the sight of him. He's aged in a way that can be gifted only through genetics, with a smile that makes him look mischievous. He's very tall, like his older brother, Paul; both are notably striking. They are considered "Irish twins," having been conceived within the same year. Christine never strays from the narrative that having three children within several years was nothing but easy bliss. Having three myself, I recognize she's entirely full of crap.

The youngest brother, Jack, found his wife in high school and got married just out of college. Lidy, his wife, is quiet and nonthreatening. She is content to exist on bland, nonconfrontational conversation topics, such as the weather or the merits of crustless sandwiches. Now and again, I'll get stranded next to her while doing the dishes or en route to the ladies' room, and forced and painful attempts at conversation will ensue. Lidy devours the version of ladylike that I've never subscribed to. Amy is a much better sport than me about O'Connor things like always having to hug each member of the family upon arrival and departure, which bookends every event with an additional twenty minutes, but I know that lately, she's grown tired of playing along too. According to the unspoken O'Connor bylaws, she's a wife but not yet a mother, and those are our only two roles within this family. I often catch Christine or Lidy not even attempting to hide their confusion as to why Amy has continually malfunctioned.

"Dinner!" Christine announces to the group.

We take our designated places at the banquet table. I tried early on to sit across from Amy, as it was the best positioning for our frequent eye-roll exchanges, but Christine has assigned seats for us. The three sisters-in-law on one side, the corresponding husbands on the other, with Christine and George at opposite ends. The grandkids have had their own separate table within the massive dining room since they were babies. Having thought of everything, Christine ensured that Dory, the nanny/housekeeper, oversees all five grandchildren. For Christine, Sunday dinners are sacred—no one, not even the babies, is allowed to upset the order of things.

Before the food is passed, Christine stands and leads us in a family ritual, one even more unhinged than their incessant hugging, family dinners, and obsession with birthday celebrations. I peek up to watch her movements. Even in her sixties, she is elegant and poised in a way that cannot be learned—oldworld Hollywood glamour. I sip from my glass and she exhales loudly enough for me to interpret her irritation that I've delayed the consecrated proceedings—so I keep the glass to my lips a moment longer before returning it slowly to the table.

She begins as she always does, extending both hands, waiting until everyone is connected. Then, she looks around, meeting each pair of eyes as if searching for someone else in all our faces. Finally, with a heavy sigh, she intones, "Let's say grace," and in unison, we all respond with a single word: "Grace." We lift our heads smiling oddly, an age-old tradition that Lucas claims started in their childhood.

"How old were your kids when they started giving you sass? It's been so long that I forget these things. I feel like Dottie's ahead of the curve. Yesterday she told me, 'No way,' when I told her it was time for bed," I say, addressing the table.

"A girl who knows what she wants—wonder where she gets that from?" Lucas says, grinning as he shovels green beans onto his plate.

"I just hope she learns to express her individuality by, like, shaving her head, becoming a vegetarian, or speaking out against animals being locked in cages for our entertainment." I take a bite of bread I just picked from the basket, adding, "But boycotting nap time interferes with Mom's me time." I point to myself with my wineglass. "And that's a problem."

Christine's eyes are squinting into small slits, as if she can't quite see me despite our proximity.

"A vegetarian; what would she eat? Beans? Like some sort of homeless person?" Christine says, still standing while overseeing the pacing of how and when the food gets passed.

"The zoo is getting pretty sad. When Amy and I took Dottie last weekend, this one monkey was sitting up in a tree, not moving." Paul has stopped passing food to emphasize his concern. "The other monkeys would just step over the poor little guy like he wasn't even there. The zookeeper came in to feed them, and he wouldn't eat." His face looks puckered as he makes big motions with his hands; his sensitivity is overkill for me, but Amy adores it. "I wonder if we should call someone." Then he turns toward Christine. "Mom, don't you know someone on the board or something?"

"I can make a call," Christine answers, noticeably tickled, though she continues to motion for Paul to keep passing. He obeys while placing his napkin on his lap.

I wink over at Amy, our code to make note of Christine's level of superiority this evening, which is bordering on a nine out of a ten-point scale—high even for her.

"What are we thinking game plan—wise? September 16 is coming up fast and furiously for the soft opening. T-minus six weeks, guys," Lucas says. "I have a list about ten feet long that I need some help with. Cough, cough, Jack, I'm lookin' at you."

"When you and Paul came up with this ridiculous idea to make Mom a restaurant, I specifically said that I can do stuff with licensing and legal, but I'm not going to be your errand boy. I am up to my ass in"—his eyes dart toward the kids' table— "Poop with the firm. One of the partners is quitting, and I'm taking on his caseload until one of the other idiots steps up."

"Language, please!" Christine scolds him, eyeing Joni, who is smiling at her uncle's foul mouth. As the eldest, she's positioned closest to the grown-up table, so she's able to eavesdrop without much difficulty.

Paul, always taking his role as the oldest brother seriously, stands and makes his way over to where Christine is still orchestrating the passage of food. On his way he lightly swats his baby brother on the back of the head before tucking his mom into her seat by gently forcing her legs to bend into her chair. He lays both hands on her shoulders, and she strokes the right one before lifting her fork so we can all begin eating.

The Cove was a fine-dining restaurant that Christine's parents lost to a fire back in the '80s. As an act of taking their mama's boys tendencies to new heights, Lucas and Paul have decided to re-create the family restaurant. The entire endeavor has been driven by Lucas and copiloted by Paul. They have chosen "The Restaurant" as a placeholder name until the big reveal at the opening in six weeks.

When I first met Lucas, he was a successful venture capitalist, and Paul, until recently, had been a financial planner. Paul quit his job to help Lucas full-time with The Restaurant. Working together has always been their dream. Jack has been involved in small ways here and there, but the heart of the project lies with my and Amy's husbands. We are grateful for the restaurant endeavor because, despite their long hours away, it has meant more time for us.

I prefer to drink my dinner on our evenings here, and so I push my food around on my plate until there's a noticeable lull in noise. For all the fuss the family has made over meals together, the O'Connors are notoriously fast eaters. Once, I decided to time from the moment Christine was invariably tucked into her chair to the first dish being brought to the sink, and it was only nine minutes. The real conversations are reserved for after-dinner cocktails, once Dory takes the kids upstairs.

After an unreasonably short amount of time, considering the work it must have taken Christine to prepare a meal for fourteen people including Dory, all the women pop up at once to do the dishes, a family tradition as old as the stereotypical gender roles themselves. Amy and I wash and dry so we can stand next to each other while Lidy busies herself labeling and shelving an unnerving number of leftovers. I slide up and bump Amy. My hip reaches almost half the height of her abdomen. I can rest my head on top of hers.

She grabs a dish and begins to scrape the remains of green beans into the trash. All the beans have been carefully picked out, and only the stalks remain. One of the children's plates, no doubt. Or it may have belonged to Jack, who still eats like a toddler.

I lean in, whispering so Lidy can't hear, "Not sure why Jack has to be such a dick about The Restaurant." I offer her a plate to rinse.

"Oh, was he? I missed that. I was distracted by the fact that there was mayonnaise on the table," she says, making a pretend puking sound.

"See, for me, when I was pregnant, it was hard-boiled eggs and the smell of dirty dishes." I motion downward toward the sink. The memory makes me shake with disgust. "It'd be nice if Jack wanted to take some of the pressure off our guys."

"It's too late now. He really should have gotten on board in the beginning," she says.

"Probably true," I concede. Then I add, "How did your latest appointment go?"

"Fine." Amy exhales deeply. She claims that the doctor has been saying the same thing for more than four years now. There has been no medical reason for any of their fertility struggles. When they finally did conceive, about two years ago, she lost the baby in the second trimester. Far later than anyone should have to endure a miscarriage, since her body went into natural labor and she had to birth a baby that she couldn't keep. I'm sure existing within our fertile family only adds to her insecurity and fear.

"At this point, everything should probably be fine, but they can't say for sure." She looks around for more plates nearby to scrape into the trash, then stops to place both hands on the counter as if she's suddenly overcome. I put my hand on the small of her back.

"I swear if men got pregnant, it would be priority one to end symptoms. That and abortions would be available at ATMs," I say, going back to drying.

"You're probably right." She shrugs. I know she's not in the mood to get into it.

Christine appears carrying a small decorative bag.

"I put together a selection of ginger tea for you to take home. Tames the stomach." She goes to hand it to Amy and leans in for a hug. They embrace and I watch as Amy relaxes into Christine, soothed by her touch much more than she had been by mine. Christine pulls away first and brushes past me, despite there being plenty of room between the sink and the kitchen island.

"That was nice," I say, refilling my glass once Christine is out of sight. Amy doesn't need to look at me to know I'm not being sincere.

"She does mean well most of the time. We should give her a break," Amy tells me, assuming her role as middleman.

"You think that tea is gonna come without a price?" I say, pausing to take a swig. "One ultrasound photo. Or baby-naming rights?"

"I've always liked the name Christine," she teases.

"What are we, the royals? But Leah, you know, can be spelled any number of ways," I say.

"You are too much," Amy says, smiling.

"Funny, I think I'm exactly enough."

After we finish the dishes, Dory takes the kids upstairs to wind down with a movie, and I emerge with an expensive bottle of limoncello in one hand and a tray of sipping glasses in the other. Christine has never once told us daughters-in-law to "make ourselves at home," which means she will soon probably start locking the door to the wine cellar.

"To what are we toasting?" George turns his head to look at Christine.

Before she can answer, I hold my glass in the air and say, "To family."

"To *our* family," Christine immediately chimes in, intentionally meeting the gaze of each of her sons.

We lift our glasses high.

"Quick picture." George stands at the head of the table with his Canon camera. Everyone stops to look at him, accustomed to his request. "Say cheese!"

Christine steps around Jack and stands between Paul and Lucas. I wrap my arms around Amy, pulling her in close.



"I feel like I'm holding my breath until Amy has her baby," I tell Lucas in the car on our way home from dinner.

"Yeah . . . how did we ever get so lucky, I wonder?" Lucas looks back at our kids in the rearview, all tucked safely inside our minivan.

"I hate this car," I say, tapping my finger on the window for emphasis.

"So you've told me," he says, his voice lower than usual. In the darkness it's hard to distinguish whether he's endeared by my repetition or annoyed by it, but I'm floating just above my body. I can't be bothered to care one way or another, so I continue. "I miss Bertha, my Volkswagen van. She was magnificent, ya know? I still think we could afound a way to strap the car seats in safely."

"Airbags weren't even a thing the year she was built. We want our children to remain alive, right?"

"Ugh. Such a buzzkill." I flutter my left hand in front of his face, a maneuver that may be dangerous as he drives, but I need him to know how ridiculous I find his question.

"Big Bertha was who I was," I say, staring out into the fog. "I am not a minivan mom."

"Which is exactly why I'm driving right now, and you aren't," he says, and I'm too fuzzy to read between the lines of his comment.

"Except I'm the one shuttling our kids around here, there, and everywhere, and I hate it." I groan. "I hate it."

The rest of the car ride fades away, and I'm no longer in the passenger seat of this sexless monstrosity. I'm putting muscle into maneuvering Bertha's massive haul of a steering wheel, and the freedom tastes as refreshing as the salt water from every swim in the ocean.

At home, the tediousness of the bedtime routine is made more enjoyable by my haze. I dump water over Dottie's hair in the bath, forgetting to cover her face with a towel first. She cries out in pain, squeezing her eyes tightly, and I quickly dab away the drops until she's satisfied and no longer whimpering. Lucas and I were almost on the road to full child autonomy, and then Dottie came along. I wrap her within her duckling bathrobe and place my nose behind one of her ears. There is something so appealing about a freshly bathed child, though the effort it takes to get them from point A to Z, where they are finally tucked away in bed safely, is more daunting than training for a marathon.

Christine is constantly sharing her memories of the boys and their delightful exuberance, as if she'd sell her soul to return for only one day. She turns practically giddy recounting how strangers stopped her in the street to marvel at her strapping young boys. Now she preaches to us, saying things like "The correct amount of parenting is like placing your hand on a spring, releasing ever so gently. Too quick, and they're gone, never to be recoiled."

"You really need to let Mom be the one to give the toast at the end of the night," Lucas says after we've finally gotten the kids down. He gets into bed, turning onto his side with his back to me.

"Huh? Now where is the fun in that?" I say, curling into an S shape around my husband, softly kissing his neck as I run my tongue gently along the length of his ear, ready to leave my body for a while.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JESSICA GUERRIERI'S debut novel, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, won the Maurice Prize for Fiction from her alma mater, UC Davis, in 2023. Originally from the Bay Area, Jessica lives in Davis, California, with her husband and three young daughters. She has a background teaching special education but left the field to pursue a career in writing while raising her daughters. With more than a decade of sobriety, Jessica is a fierce advocate for addiction recovery.