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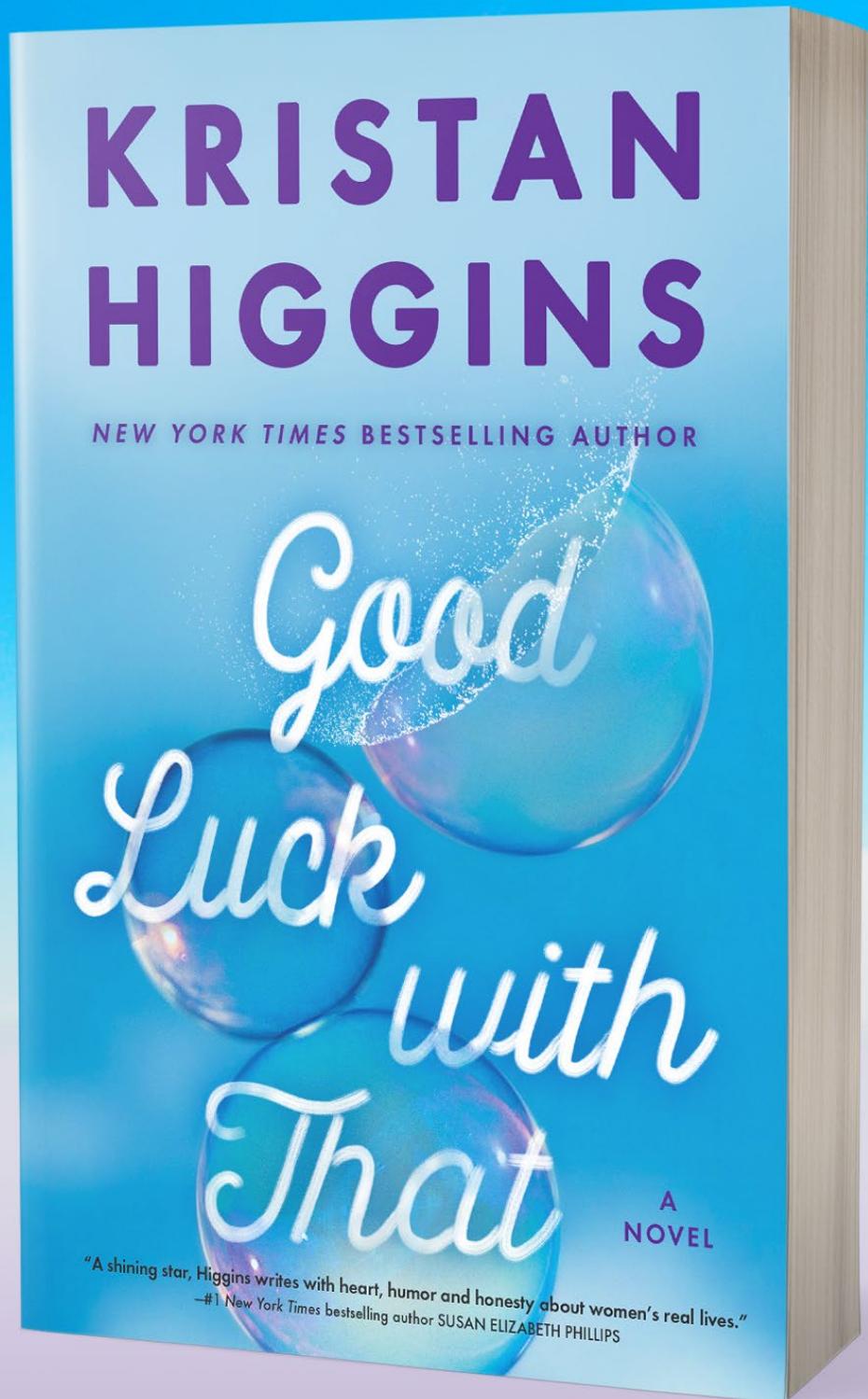
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MARLEY

That evening, I made my rounds, evading the Levinsons' Great Pyrenees dog, who always wanted to molest, drool and shed on me, making me appreciate Admiral all the more for his extreme politeness, short fur and well-behaved salivary glands. At the Putneys' house, I rearranged the stuff in their fridge and wiped down their counters, since they were slobs and I couldn't bear to picture my excellent food on sticky counters.

At the next stop, I chatted with Nellie Ames, a sweet old lady whose grown children hired me to make sure she didn't subsist on Lucky Charms and Kit Kat bars alone. Though it wasn't in my job description, I tidied her living room and fed the cats, then showed her how to text her great-granddaughter. (Sorry, kid.) Finally, I kissed her soft, wrinkled cheek and said good-bye.

"You're wonderful!" she crowed, texting away with her gnarled forefinger.

The last delivery of the evening was Will Harding. If we had our usual three-word exchange, I'd be on time at Mom's and avoid either a speeding ticket and/or a full-blown Amber Alert.

He was waiting by the door, like . . . well, like a serial killer. As usual, he was dressed in completely unremarkable clothes: khakis and a button-down shirt. He was a plain-looking guy, saved from being completely forgettable by his hair, which stuck up in odd places and gave him a sort of tousled, Jason-Bateman-if-he-played-a-serial-killer vibe.

"Hi!" I said, always exuding more energy with him, the human black hole. "Homemade linguine with basil, asparagus and chicken. The butter sauce is in this container; if you keep it in the fridge, it'll solidify, so just toss it in a frying pan for a couple minutes if it does. I didn't want to pour it on too soon or the asparagus will get soggy. Tomorrow's lunch is that Asian noodle salad you like. I included a side of arugula, too. It's good for you. Dark leafy greens, you know?"

Will just stood there.

May kill people in his spare time.

"Okay," I said. "I have to run. Maybe you can pay me tomorrow?"

“I would like to pay you now.”

I glanced at my watch. “Fine.”

He went into the next room and took the checkbook out. Slowly wrote me my check. Slowly came back into the kitchen. My keys were already in my hand.

He didn’t hand me the check.

“I’ll just take that, then,” I said.

“I have a favor to ask,” he said, still not handing over the check. Instead, he looked steadily at my chin.

“Okay. Go ahead.”

“Two weeks from Tuesday, would you make something that’s not on your menu?”

“Sure. Can I call you tomorrow about it?”

“I’d like orange beef teriyaki. The Chinese kind.”

I suppressed a sigh. “You bet.”

“In the brown sauce. The rice should be sticky.”

“I’m sure I can make that. But, Will, I have to leave now. My family has an event.”

“Also, would you . . .” He broke off.

“Would I what?”

“Would you make enough for two?”

“Of course.” My portions could always serve two, but I’d double it. I held out my hand for the check.

“And would you stay and eat with me?”

I couldn’t help twitching in surprise. “Oh! Um . . . uh, what day again?”

“Two weeks from Tuesday,” he said. “Are you free?”

“I don’t know. Um, I really do have to—”

“Would you check? I imagine your calendar updates to your phone.”

He was right, of course, but I could practically hear my mother wringing her hands. “I’m old school,” I lied. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

He looked down. “Fine.”

It occurred to me that I had never seen Will Harding smile. I had never seen him have any expression, really, just that same face, a little tense. It was possible that he had Asperger's, maybe, not that I knew about these things.

He had never asked me to make dinner for two.

It occurred to me that he might be a little . . . lonely.

"I'm free," I found myself saying. "I'm almost positive. I'll see you tomorrow. Now, I have to leave, or my mother will call the police."

"Thank you," he said, finally handing me the check. "Good-bye."

Traffic was not great. I clenched the wheel, zipping around slow, non-native New Yorkers, and walked into my parents' house at 6:33, just three minutes late.

"Where have you *been*?" Mom asked. "She's here, everyone! Finally. We were so worried."

"Hi, Ma," I said, kissing her cheek. "Hi, Daddy."

"Hello, muffin," Dad said, giving me a hug. "How's my girl?"

"Just fine," I said. I put my food contribution—a salad—on the counter.

"You said you'd be here at six thirty," Mom said.

I ignored her and made the rounds, hugging Dante and Louis, who were holding hands on the couch in their newlywed bliss. "So good to see you the other night," Louis said. "Did you have fun?"

"So much fun," I lied. "I've never seen that video of Dante before. Very exciting."

"Which video of Dante?" Mom asked.

"Something about him rescuing a little girl?" I winked at the boys.

"Of course you've seen it! We had a screening party here! I was going to put it on later so we could watch it again."

"I was being sarcastic, Ma. I have it memorized. It's burned on my soul."

"Well, it should be. Not everyone gets to save a baby like that." Her voice got choked up as she gazed with puppy eyes at her son.

"Hey, Eva," I said, patting my sister on the shoulder. She wasn't the hugging type, which made her a freak in our family.

“You’re late,” my sister said, looking up from her phone.

“A hundred and eighty seconds.”

“Sinner.”

“I hope dinner’s not too cold,” Mom said. “I was hoping to eat at six thirty, and now it’s six thirty-seven.”

“Can I at least change out of my work clothes?” I asked.

“No. Here’s your wine.” She pushed a glass into my hand. “Come on, everyone.”

The boys got off the couch, and Dad came into the living room so we could toast Frankie.

Her pictures were fading. Maybe Eva, who did something complicated and brilliant in the computer world, could scan it and pop the color up a little.

I hated this ritual. Hated it and participated in it every time I was here, which was really far too often.

Even in pictures, you could tell Frankie was failing to thrive. Too small, too delicate, too pale. I looked at Ebbers the Penguin, his flat black eyes filled with judgment.

For a second, I almost remembered the feeling of Ebbers between us on the nights when I slipped into Frankie’s bed. Or maybe that was just my wistful hope—to have a memory of Frankie that was more than a story I’d been told.

“To our beautiful Francesca,” Mom said, her voice quivering. “We miss you, angel. We love you.”

“We miss you, Frankie,” we all echoed, even Dante and Louis, who’d never met her. Eva was stone-faced. We had never talked about Frankie, she and I. Not once.

In an Italian family, you talked about everything except what really mattered.

I chugged my wine, and we trooped into the dining room. Mom wiped her eyes, and Dad gave her a hug and kissed her temple. My parents held hands wherever they went. In some ways, Frankie’s loss made them into just one person, like two trees that had grown into each other over the years, wrapping around and protecting each other.

I tried to picture Camden here, as my other half. He’d fit in nicely. I knew he was close to his younger sister. This past summer, he’d gone to the Adirondacks with his whole family. He liked

to eat. He was even Italian, which would make Mom and Dad happy.

We took our usual seats—Mom closest to the kitchen, Dad at the other end, Dante and me facing the living room, Eva and Louis across from us.

The table was barely visible under the food Mom had made, and as ever, the sight and smells of food cheered me. Eggplant Parm, my favorite! Meatballs, Dante's fave, made with ground veal, beef and turkey. Chicken oregano, Eva's favorite and a close runner-up for me. Sausage and broccoli rabe, Louis's favorite. Garlic bread, everyone's favorite. The green salad I'd brought—the one hint of healthy eating. Caponata with pignoli nuts, ziti with sauce, fresh mozzarella cheese.

“We gonna say grace?” Dante asked around the meatball already bulging in his cheek. Eva was tearing into the bread, dunking in salted olive oil, and Dad was shoveling a slab of eggplant Parm onto his plate.

“Dear Lord, thank you for our beautiful children and my amazing wife,” Dad said cheerfully.

“Aw! You two!” I said.

“I hope Dante and I are half as lucky as you two, Tony,” Louis said, getting a smile from my father.

“Do you mind? I’m eating,” Eva said, getting the middle finger from Dante.

“When are you boys gonna have a baby?” I asked. “I want to be an auntie.”

“Since you mention it in that subtle way of yours,” Dante said, “we’re thinking next year, maybe we’ll start looking at adoption. Right, babe?”

“That’s right,” Louis said. They exchanged a look of mutual adoration.

“There’s no pasta e fagioli” Dad asked mournfully, since we only had enough food to feed Europe.

“I *told* you, Anthony, I’ll make it tomorrow!” Mom said, wounded. “You said you wanted fresh moots”—our way of saying mozzarella—“so I found it, and let me tell you, it wasn’t easy, mister, I had to go to four grocery stores and paid eleven dollars for it at Whole Foods, honestly, who can shop there, don’t they have children to put through college?”

“Speaking of kids, Eva, do you ever think about adopting?” Louis, bless his heart, asked.

“No, I hate children,” she said. “People, too, now that I think of it.”

“Don’t say that!” Mom said. “Shame on you, Eva.”

“She does,” I confirmed. “You’re new to the family, Louis. You’ll learn.”

“I hate people except for those sitting at this table,” Eva amended. “I’ll love your kids, Louis. Just don’t ever ask me to babysit. Ma, pass the eggplant. Please.”

My sister was an odd duck. A wonderful duck, but strange. She’d recoil when our cousins offered their offspring for her to hold, skipping every baby shower and most weddings. I knew she belonged to a science fiction book club. Otherwise, what she did in her time off was a mystery.

Like me, she was heavy. No. She was *really* heavy, a lot heavier than me. But she didn’t seem to mind a bit, whereas I was already cutting myself off from the bounty of my mother’s table and would run five miles tomorrow to cancel out the calories I did pack away. Eva had never had a boyfriend (or girlfriend) that I knew of, never mentioned wanting one. Freakishly, our mother didn’t give her a hard time about it, whereas I was reminded of my tragic, childless, single state at least once a day through a variety of media.

“Well, I hope you do adopt,” Dad said to the boys. “I’d like a grandson.”

“I’d like a niece,” I said.

“I’d like the ziti,” Eva said. “Ma, this food is amazing.”

Mom beamed. “Well. I did work all day and my feet are killing me, and I’m so hungry because I did want to eat at six thirty but Marley was late, and now my food is cold, but I’m glad you like it.”

“Marles,” Dante said, “you coming to the fun run in Central Park?”

“What fun run?”

“You said you’d come. Remember?”

“This is the first I’m hearing of it.” Another family trait, not mentioning events where one was expected to show up.

“It’s the New York City Fights Hunger thing. Oh, Ma, these meatballs.”

“New York should just come here,” Eva said. “No hunger at this table, right, Ma?”

“That’s right, baby.” She smiled and patted Eva’s hand.

“You should come, too, Evie,” Dante said.

Eva gave him a look. “To run?”

“It’s good for you.”

“Have we met?” Eva said.

“You could lose a little—” His comment was cut off by Eva’s hearty smack to his head.

“Fine,” he said. “At least my nice sister will be there.”

Go for a run in tight clothes and sports bra. Oh, dear God. It was on the list.

“I’ll be there,” I said. Georgia could come, too.

We talked and ate some more (thank God I brought salad). Otherwise, it was a nonstop orgy of artery-hardening deliciousness. I always laughed when someone used the phrase *Mediterranean diet* in terms of health. Clearly not my ancestors’ part of the Mediterranean.

“So, kids,” Dad said after we’d all had thirds and were starting to slow down. “Your mommy and I, we have something to tell you.”

“Is it cancer?” Dante asked. “Who? Which one? Ma, is it you? Daddy?”

“It’s not cancer!” Mom said, crossing herself. “Where do you get these ideas?”

“Oh, thank you, Jesus,” Dante said, crossing himself, which made me cross myself. Louis did the same, then Dad. Eva abstained, but she did knock on the wooden table. You could take the Catholic out of the girl, but not the superstition.

“No one’s sick,” Dad said, which resulted in another round of the signing of the cross, more knocks on the table. “But Mommy and me, we’ve been thinking. We’re not so young anymore.”

“You’re sixty-two, Dad,” Eva said. “You probably have forty years left.”

“From your lips to God’s ears.” Another round of crosses and knocks. A strand of hair got tangled in my necklace, and I tried to separate the two. Stupid hair, always going where it didn’t belong. I’d cut it, but I’d tried that once and ended up looking like a poodle.

“Anyway,” Dad continued, “we’re hoping to be around for a long time, but we’ve been thinking it’s time to sell the house.”

I stopped trying to free my hair. Dante froze, a whole meatball impaled on the end of his fork. Louis's big brown eyes swiveled toward him. Eva's mouth dropped open.

Mom wasn't making eye contact, just staring at her plate.

My eyes went to Frankie's shrine.

"Well, that's exciting," Louis said. "Where will you go?"

"We were thinking somewhere warmer. The winters, you know."

"How much warmer?" Eva asked. "New Jersey warmer, or Florida warmer?"

"Oh, Florida," Mom said, waving her hand. "Who wants to go there? The bugs. The alligators."

"We've been thinking Maryland," Dad said. "We like the Chesapeake Bay. Very pretty. Lots of ducks."

"Have you even *been* to Maryland?" Eva asked. "Not that I disapprove, but maybe visiting the state first would be a good plan."

"We made an offer on a house," Mom said.

"What?" Dante screeched.

There was something wrong with my chest. I couldn't look away from the pictures of Frankie. This had been her house, too. For that exact reason, I never, ever would've suspected my parents would sell it.

"We won't go if you don't want us to," Mom said.

"No, no, it's totally up to you," Eva answered. "Right, guys?"

"We'd visit all the time. Eva, we could stay with you. You have that second bedroom," Dad said. "A month or two in Maryland, a month with you."

"Sure," Eva said. "You can stay as long as you want."

Dante and I exchanged baffled looks at her equanimity.

"You're a good girl," Mom said.

"So you'd still be here a lot," Dante said. "For birthdays and stuff. Grandchildren."

"Of course!" Mom said, affronted. "You think we won't be good grandparents? Get us a baby and you'll see. It's just . . . winters. We hate winter now. We're old."

I jumped as a sharp pain lanced my shin. Eva, kicking me. “Um . . . yeah! Sure! That sounds really exciting, Mom. Dad. That’s great. Maryland’s so pretty.”

“Want to see?” Dad asked. “It’s real nice. Plus, two extra bedrooms for when you kids come to visit. It’s the Dogwood model. Awfully pretty. Almost as big as this place, but one-floor living, you know? I have pictures on the computer.”

We left the decimated table and trooped into the den, where Dad pulled up pictures of what looked like a very posh park surrounded by lovely, newly built cottages on wooded lots.

My mother still wasn’t making eye contact.

“Can you afford this?” Dante asked.

“This house here is worth a lot,” Eva said. “Close to the city, good school district. They’ll get close to a million for it.”

My parents were always the most solid of the middle class. Dad had his own plumbing business, which had always been a good living, putting food on the table and a roof over our heads. They’d loaned me ten grand when I started Salt & Pepper, and Dante and Louis’s wedding had been gorgeous. Mom had been a stay-at-home mama and then, when Dante graduated high school, got a part-time job shelving books at the library.

But what Eva said was probably true. A nice enough house in a decent neighborhood within spitting distance of the city . . .

Well, shit.

“See the kitchen?” Mom said now. “Isn’t that nice? And the closet space! You wouldn’t think there’d be so much in a little house, but there is.”

“Beautiful,” I said. My voice sounded a little strange.

“Who wants dessert?” Mom announced when she felt we’d seen enough. “I made a cake. Two, actually, because, Louis, honey, I know you love chocolate.”

“You’re good to me, Patty,” he said, putting a brawny arm around her shoulder. “You’ll come back and bake me a cake every now and again, won’t you?”

“Of course! You kids come visit, we come up here . . .”

“Eva, you have no problem with the parents living with you?” Dante asked once Louis was

in the other room with our parents.

“No. Why would I?”

I told you she was odd.

They wandered back into the dining room. I followed, but didn’t dare look over at Frankie’s shrine. As always, my tiny twin was the elephant in the room. How could they leave the place where her short life had taken place? It felt wrong. It felt *horrible*.

But I didn’t say anything. I just sat back down with the family and ate a slab of orange polenta cake.

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