

Chapter 1

“I’m right beside you. I’m right here my love. I am beside you,” Danny says repeating this incantation every few moments as if its repetition will build in power and magically heal her.

Her face is flushed and moist from sweat. Her naturally curly hair is clumped at the top. His fingers graze through her temple, stroking her hair as one does a cat’s chin. Normally it would be a calming gesture but now it only makes Isabelle more anxious.

She has sharp dagger dents that live between her eyebrows and furrow across her forehead. “Where am I?”

“You’re in the recovery room.”

Isabelle feels her belly just where her uterus lies. It’s swollen and cramping. The pain slithers outward across her sides and down her legs like a viper, confident and predatory.

Danny’s eyes hang low and his mouth droops to the side a bit.

“You should get some sleep,” she says.

“I will, don’t worry,” he says as he continues stroking her head and purr affectionate words to her. “You should get some sleep yourself you know. Try and rest up.”

Isabelle looks around the room. A teddy bear with a ratty stitched-on heart sits on the chair opposite her bed. Its empty smile is plain yet sinister. It feels as if the bear is knowingly mocking her.

Knowing.

She looks up. The same fluorescent hospital lights she’s come to know so well line the ceiling. She can recall the defining details of these lights better than she can recall her own mother’s face. These lights have become a source of comfort for her in a way. In times of isolation and loneliness in the hospital, she’s made friends with the lights for what else are you supposed to do? She knows her thoughts are too dangerous to ponder upon.

“Where did you go?” Danny asks.

Isabelle looks down, she is still stirring the creamer into her coffee. She likes it so damn white that it goes down like milk.

“Just remembering,” She says as she watches a couple walk down the street holding hands. The taller guy leans over and whispers secrets into his boyfriend’s ear. His smile perfectly extracted from his thin, wispy mouth.

They sit at a cafe in downtown Charlotte. It’s 3 pm.

Much too late for coffee Isabelle thinks. She knows she has to be up at 6 am for her flight tomorrow and will need to get to bed early.

Flying always gives Isabelle a deep sense of dread. Like her life is tethered to the earth and the further away she drifts from the ground, the tighter her life-line becomes. More fragile. Easier to cut through when a line becomes taut.

“Do you like it?” Danny gestures to her drink.

Isabelle realizes she is still stirring and hasn't even taken a sip yet.

“Sure, it's alright,” She replies flatly.

Isabelle just wants to be left alone for once in her goddamned life. Why is it that whenever she is just trying to enjoy the moment, enjoy the thought, Danny has to try and make small talk? It's meaningless dribble that won't provide any new information or context to their relationship.

She could hate this coffee or love it and it won't change anything about who or what they are.

She sighs and watches as a mother pushes a stroller carrying two toddlers who are wearing matching power ranger shirts. The little boy yells at his sister that he is the blue power ranger.

“Why can't I be the blue power ranger?” She cries.

“Because you're a girl. And the girl has to be pink.” He responds as a matter of fact.

The little girl cries to her mom that she wants to

be blue and the mother's only approach is to hush the girl and continue on her stroll.

Isabelle feels her face get hot. The anger creeps up into her chest and neck. It settles in so swiftly as if it has been hiding. Just tucked away, watching, waiting for its moment to get you. Shit, if she was the mother she knows damn well her daughter would be anything but the pink power ranger. She wishes at that moment she could be that girl's mom.

She thinks about how she would reassure her daughter. She would get down and look her daughter in the eye and tell her that she can be whichever power ranger she wants. And she would tell her son that pink isn't only for girls but can be for any color. Isabelle actually fancies pink on a man. It can be a rather chic color if the man wears it right.

But of course, she would never say this to her five-year-old children. She imagines their reaction if she did, their confused and puzzled faces. What would her children think of her?

Isabelle starts laughing over the confusion of her made-up children and Danny brings his attention back over to her.

"What are you laughing at?" He asks trying so hard to be casual. A smile stretches across his face and he laughs with her. Trying to fit in. But she knows him better than that. She knows that he is insecure and is asking not because he is genuinely curious

but because he's jealous.

She knows he's thinking "Why isn't she laughing with me? Is she laughing at me?" and therefore has to be so perfectly relaxed to ask what is a loaded question for him. Because the wrong answer may set him off and they both know it.

"Oh nothing, just thinking." She replies.

His smile drops. Wrong answer.

"Well, you must've been laughing at something."

"I was but too much to explain my love, you know how my brain works."

"Of course. Of course." He stops. Looks away.

He won't let it go. She knows he will fume about this all afternoon and bring it up tonight. Preferably not right when she is about to go to bed, but she knows that it will probably be then. It always seems to be then.

Chapter 2

The summer sun is getting rather confident this June. Like a man in a post-workout selfie, Isabelle tells her friends. They all laugh together over wine and a French sex dramedy in which an impish yet sexually liberated man naturally feels liberated when he sucks what remaining essence out of his sexually repressed partner. However, unlike Americans, the French women seem to defend themselves pretty well. They too have become the liberators in Cinema, but the men aren't as attractive in the feminist approach of it all. We can still be feminists and want a hunk, right? Isabelle thinks to herself.

This casual Sunday afternoon tradition is a long-standing tradition that Isabelle and her girlfriends have attempted to continue in the nine years since graduating with their master's. However, as their lives seem to branch out to other people and other parts of the world, this tradition has been reduced to weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, and lastly to bi-monthly.

Isabelle is proud, however, that they have remained such *good* friends and can continue to drink wine and watch foreigners with abstract bodies have copious amounts of sex. The only difference besides the reduction in the tradition is now that these women all have stable, and even some, great jobs, they can afford high-shelf wine over cheap seven-dollar wine from the local gas station.

Isabelle, being one of the more successful women among her friends, always uses these gatherings as an opportunity to show her gratitude. She took it upon herself to install the best screen, projector, and sound system in the market to ensure that she will host every future gathering. Isabelle also purchased the most lavish and comfortable couches for her and her friends to lounge on for the day. In addition, she sends Danny out of the house on a little field trip, typically to go golf or watch a sports game with his friends. It is the perfect day.

It is one of the few things Isabelle looks forward to in her life, but she would never admit that. Her friends and family expect her to be happy, engaged, and successful. And a person like that would enjoy a lot more in life than just girls' day.

Danny arrived home later that evening disheveled. His breath smelled of liquor and pizza.

He headed straight for the bathroom before saying anything to her. After an extended period of time,

he finally exited and tried to kiss her neck which she rejected. He made a move for her breasts but she just turned away and got on their bed.

“What’s wrong?” He whispered tenderly into her ear.

“You’re drunk.” She laid out on the bed. Caressing her belly under her warm, sticky palms. She rubbed them on her nightdress to no avail. It’s difficult to not be sticky during summer, even with the cool A/C working so hard Isabelle is fearful of the damned thing exploding.

“So what? I had a few drinks. But look at me, I’m great!” Danny shows off for her, flexing his muscles real slow to show the fantastic vascular system his body was gifted at birth.

“I don’t like it when you drink.” She said and rolled over.

“I can sober up pretty quickly! I promise I’m not even drunk.”

Isabelle chuckled to herself thinking, “Men will do anything at even the glistening hint of possible sex.”

She likes having this power over him. Isabelle rolls over and beckons him to the bed. She teases him with her slim hips. Guiding his hands over her body. He is her marionette. She rubs her hands over his, grasping them and moaning as he plays with her breasts. She grabs a finger and begins to suck on it.

Until she stops.

A thousand-pound weight drops in her stomach. Her legs tremble. She gets dizzy.

She can't even fathom thinking about it. It's a question she already knows the answer to, but the feeling is unshakable. She has to ask it. She wouldn't forgive herself if she kept on going. So takes a moment, builds up the courage, breathes deeply, and asks, "Where is your engagement ring?"

Chapter 3

There is a stark difference between motherhood and fatherhood. Isabelle can't place her finger on it, but she knows that there is a difference. A natural tenderness of motherhood. Of course there is! The mother bears the child for nine straight months while the father does what? Fuckin' nothing that's what. Who births the child again?

The ground feels unstable. Isabelle can't think straight. Her lifeline feels stretched out to its limit. "Where was I going again," she thinks.

She thinks the ground looks incredibly close before realizing that she is falling toward it.

"Here let me help you up," a nurse says.

"Where was I going?" Isabelle asks as she is being lifted from the floor.

"You said you needed air. Want to go back to your room?"

Isabelle nods and lets the nurse guide her back to the hospital room.

Sometimes you wake up and you can just feel

it. A rare day among lucky people, perhaps a regular day for most. But Isabelle woke up this morning thinking *today is a cursed day*. Her head was pounding. A throbbing migraine that has been running at eleven all day. She hasn't prayed to god since her junior year at St. Matthews Christian High School but she is tempted this morning.

The park is neat and orderly. The grass is trimmed just so. The wind is blowing just easily enough. But for whatever reason it just isn't right. Like the whole world is replaced with this uncanny version of itself and its cracked just enough that you get glimpses past the facade. Into the *real* world.

Danny sits opposite her, a carbonated lime-flavored water drink rests in his hand. He's peeled off the label and keeps turning the beverage over and over.

"Why are you so sad?" He asks. "Why won't you talk to me?"

"I can't." Isabelle moans. Tears run down her long, pointed nose like divers taking a plunge.

"Please Isabelle, we're worried about you. You need to talk to someone. Your mother says—"

She cuts him off, "Don't you talk about my mother, my mother is dead! Dead, okay? Dead! She isn't alive to me anymore, okay? You should know that better than anyone."

"Anyone but her," he responds.

“Listen, I don’t need no sympathy from you. I don’t need your concern. So why don’t you leave me to my own problems?”

“Because your problems are hurting other people, Isabelle! You hurt a child! Don’t you see how messed up this all is?”

Isabelle sits back on her bench. The truth stung her. The park was not a good meeting place. It is a constant reminder. Everywhere she looks are children running about, jovial mother’s lovingly watching their young ones. It was too painful to bear.

“I mourn my life with you Danny! I mourn out lives together. I can’t stand this person I am now, don’t you understand that? I can’t live with myself anymore. I mourn us and the future we held!”

Danny stands up and puts his hands on his hips. He throws the water bottle at the ground. The smack of the plastic radiates Isabelle’s headache to a new life.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do with that Isabelle?”

He looks up and sees mother’s hurrying after their little ones, scooping them up and shooting scolding looks towards the blubbering couple.

“We should leave, I don’t want to cause a scene,” he says.

She is now sobbing. The tears burn her cheeks

like acid. She wishes with every inhale she would inhale poison over oxygen.

“I had a miscarriage on purpose Danny. I lied to you. I lied and I regret it every single day! I had it on purpose. My little one. I killed my little one. ” Isabelle sobs between words.

“What?” Danny sits down in disbelief. “On purpose? Why?”

“I knew you didn’t want to be a father and... and well I was scared.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you talk to me Iz?”

“I didn’t know how. And I wish I did. And it’s fucked up because I see children everywhere. All the time! And all I want now is to be a mother. I want it so bad. But I can’t... because I’m too... old!” She cries out.

Danny leans back now, stunned. Isabelle continues to sob, her face in her hands.

“Go away, I can’t bear to look at you right now.”

Danny gets up and walks away shaking his head.

Isabelle looks around at the families all running away from her, the crazy lady at the park. She laughs at her own misery. At least they will have a good story to tell she thinks.