



**THE
MAGUS
AND
THE
FOOL**



A Novel

Also by Akiva Hersh

Boy in the Hole

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The Magus and The Fool

Akiva Hersh

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Ere the net is noticed by us,
Is a happier one imprison'd,
Whom we, one and all, together
Greet with envy and with blessings.

The Magic Net, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Chapter One

When I was a boy and more eager to eavesdrop I overheard my father admonishing a dinner guest, saying, “Remember where you came from and know where you are going.”

He never told me this advice directly as talking to each other was not our strongest suit. But his words impacted me. I’m careful not to leap to conclusions about people’s motivations. His philosophy inspired me to view humanity with a voracious curiosity. Still, that fascination also made me prey to dull and pointless talk by those who abuse such a quality in a person. They sniff it out like a truffle pig. And so, in college, I was dubbed Mr. Diplomat because it got around that I could keep a secret, many of which my ears wish they had never heard. At the slightest hint that an unsolicited confession was heading my way, I complained of a headache and coughed uncontrollably before whichever of my classmates let loose upon me their derivative, affected drivel.

I have tried to heed my father’s advice because it seemed sensible. But I am also an idealist, and I have failed to remain faithful to it, fearing that where I have been might occlude

my vision of where I want to go. And yet this failure on my part reminds me that others are troubled by the same worry and I at least owe them the kindness of keeping an open mind.

However, time and experience have taught me that my compassion is limited.

When I came back from Austin last fall, I craved a world that was even tenor, one emitting a singular pitch into which everyone was tuned. No longer did I want to face the riotous mob inside every human heart. But then there was Oskar Jacobi, the only person I didn't want to integrate into this harmonious world. Jacobi remained the phantom of my hatred. If the ego is born by the universal stream of consciousness rushing into individual minds, then Jacobi was magnificent. His mind was calibrated to detect the best life had to offer in the way radar transmits signals into the sky to detect far-off weather formations. He had been gifted with a sensitivity for optimism and passion like no one I had ever encountered, and I never hope to again. With Jacobi, everything turned out just as it should have. But no matter what the blessings were that came with his gift, the curses hung in the air like smoke in the burning aftermath of his dreams. He is the reason why I have no tolerance for the passion and heartbreak of men.



The Iversons have been in Oberlin, Ohio, nearly since the foundation. We are a middle-class bunch, some of us professors, others hardworking in various businesses, including the town's newspaper. But I sometimes wonder if I weren't adopted, as I bear little resemblance to my forefathers with crooked noses and overgrown, wavy beards. I did inherit their diligence

regarding money and education, however, and graduated from Oberlin College in 2019. My father attended and taught at Oberlin, as did my grandfather.

I became anxious and ill at ease with the Midwestern pace of life. Time trickled by like the creek that snuck through the town as if it were an apology. I decided to move to Austin, Texas and accepted a position with a watchdog firm whose mission was to hold big businesses accountable. My family considered my plans and gave me a cautious but supportive green light. Dad thought it was such a worthy thing he agreed to loan me enough money to live on for a year. With some ambivalence, I left Oberlin for my new life in the spring of 2021.

I should have gone with my first instinct and rented a room in the heart of Austin, but a charismatic young colleague from the office convinced me we should rent a cottage together on Lake Travis. Our commute would only be forty minutes, and he was nice to look at. We found a rental, a rustic relic from the sixties, but right before we moved in, the firm sent him to Florida so, I went to the lake on my own. I had my clothes, a cat named Achilles, and a late model Nissan SUV.

For a few days, I felt like the new kid in school with no one to sit with at lunch. Then one afternoon, a man, quite the hippie, who had just moved in near me, hailed me at my mailbox.

“Hey, dude, how do you get to the market here on Emerald Bluff?”

After I gave him directions, I wasn't a newcomer anymore. I felt ownership of and power in this parcel by the lake.

Summer burst in with golden shards of sunlight ricocheting across the surface of the water. The gentle green hills surrounding the bluff seemed to move on a separate trajectory from

the lake and the blue sky. Pontoon boats dotted the water, and people swam, and there was movement everywhere. Life was renewed in the month of June.

I had so much research to get done. I was preparing for an upcoming campaign against a bill that would endanger Texans' right to organized protest and needed to read everything about the issue and then write campaign proposals for email and web publications. But the cool water and the warm sun, a contrast that gave me great pleasure, was a tempting distraction.

I had been a bit of a writer at Oberlin and many of my editorials were published in *The Oberlin Review*, but to resurrect those skills now felt like I was being diminished as if I were going backward rather than forward. On our infrequent phone calls, Dad reminded me that integrating the new experiences the world offered with what was already manifest in me was a characteristic of wisdom. It wasn't bad advice, for we should mine the depths of past experiences and store whatever resources we get from them for the future.

I couldn't have known before I moved into that cottage that I'd stumbled upon one of the strangest places in the United States, heralding its own slogan, *Keep Austin Weird*, which the raucous lake community heartily embraced. The peninsula of Emerald Bluff juts out into the winding Colorado River, looking like a foot about to step on a snake. East of there, across the river, is a clothing-optional beach where anyone can flash breasts and asses before admiring eyes. Police boats patrol the waters and stop drunken boaters for swerving and speeding. Due north of me sits The Hollows, a crescent-shaped section of the mainland, with rugged cliffs and rocky beaches. Perhaps the two were one before the Colorado River tore them apart.

I lived on Emerald Bluff which was more casual than The Hollows. Although casual fails to describe the stark and mischievous differences between the two. My house sat at the very

northern edge of the bluff, just a few minutes' walk to the cove. On either side of me were elephantine homes worth millions. The one on my right was a mammoth marvel by the most decadent standard—a recently built three-story mansion. It was crowned by a half-circle foyer, eight fireplaces, a grand staircase, two swimming pools (one fresh, one saltwater), and three acres of landscaped native grasses, shrubs, and gardens. This was Jacobi's estate, although I didn't know it at the time. My cottage, a small blight on the landscape, was in an underdeveloped section of Emerald Bluff, so I had quite a view of the lake, a partially obstructed view of Jacobi's central garden, and the comfortable presence of billionaires.

Across the river from me glared the limestone-bricked palatial fortresses of the ever-chic Hollows. I consider the beginning of my life in Austin the night I went over there to have dinner with Donovan and Fallon Macandeior. Donovan was my cousin, and I had attended Oberlin with his wife, Fallon.

Besides her academic accomplishments at Oberlin, Fallon had earned the reputation for being the single most frightening woman to piss off on campus. Her family was ridiculously rich—earning her scorn from everyone for the way she was frivolous with her wealth. Her propensity to spend money rendered one speechless: for example, she'd bought a harras of Akhal-Teke horses just so she and her friends might ride dressage, which they never did. I had never met anyone close to my age who had enough money to do that.

They had lived in Rome for some time so Fallon could expand her business. Then for no apparent reason, they decided on Austin as “our forever home,” said Donovan over FaceTime one night many months ago. But was it really? I had no clue how Donovan truly felt about it. Still, I couldn't imagine Fallon trading the down-home feel of Lake Travis for the drama of

acquiring a flailing company, gutting its weakest employees, and turning it into a thriving revenue stream.

And so, in the half-light of that warm, still evening, I drove to The Hollows to dine with the only people I knew in Austin but barely knew at all. Their mansion was more elegant than I could have possibly imagined, a modern but comfy waterfront property constructed of natural materials—quarried limestone, fir beam ceilings, clerestory, and wall-to-wall windows that welcomed natural light for an airy ambiance. It had a gourmet kitchen, a separate guest house and office, an outdoor spa, pool, and fire pits. Their sloped lawn swelled up from the beach and spread itself out another hundred yards, where it finally caressed the house and opened its unflinching palm to perch it on the overlook. A warm, lazy breeze pawed my face and made its way, catlike, through the open windows. Fallon Macandeior, in skin-tight jodhpurs, sat wide-legged on a bench and watched me approach the portico.

She hadn't changed at all since our days at Oberlin. She was masculine, all sharp thin lines contrasted by shadow and light, a chiaroscuro of a woman. Her copper-like eyes shone out of her deep sockets and complimented her threatening appearance. She was slender and muscular, and she possessed every inch of her clean and crisp breeches. Hers was a body made for war—a harsh and severe form. One could pick out her bourbon-throated voice in a roaring crowd at the races. Her tone conveyed disapproval, even when she was pleased. We got along fine at Oberlin, but I never knew where I stood with her.

“I'm sure you've never stepped foot in a more fantastic house than this,” she said, her metallic eyes darting about my face like a searchlight.

She grasped my arm and directed my gaze toward the lake with her long pinkie finger, her French manicured nail cut across the horizon. “One of the Pickens’ boys owned all this until he lost it in a scandal, poor bastard.” Fallon pushed the small of my back toward the entrance, her style of hospitality. “Come in.”

We walked into a luminous foyer. The wood, stone, and tile gave one a sturdy feeling, but the space was not constricting. The house was lined with windows, occasionally interrupted by a limestone wall. There were no curtains. The open windows drew a breeze into the house as if it were breathing. The kitchen and sitting room were practically one space, only separated by a counter and a thick wooden support beam. Vintage prints by Razzia and Gruau added alluring red and yellow colors to the spartan white limestone walls. Beneath the Bugatti Atlantic poster sat a prodigious chalky-white couch where two men were submerged on the plush cushions like blackberries on a dollop of whipped cream. They were both dressed in black, and the top buttons of their shirts were open wide, exposing bronze skin over collar bones that begged attention. I became aware that I was lingering on them well beyond polite social convention when Fallon Macandeior cleared her throat and pressed a button on the wall, and all of the windows slid closed with a crisp snap. The breeze vanished, and without it, the room’s air became heavy and solid.

I did not know the smaller of the two men. He was stretched out with his legs crisscrossed on the dark leather ottoman, his manner *dégagé*. His face was turned up as though he were watching for something to fall from the ceiling. He did not acknowledge me at all.

The other man, Donovan, tried to push himself up off the couch and then giggled, and I laughed too, walking toward him.

“I can’t stand it, cousin. I’m so happy to see you,” said Donovan.

He laughed harder and took my hand. His face seemed to say that I was the most important person in the room to him. That was his way. He whispered something to me. I leaned in closer, and he whispered again that the benign man’s last name was Safran.

Mr. Safran lowered his head to wink at me and then tilted his head back again, still waiting for whatever he was looking at to surely fall. I felt guilty for disrupting his watch, and I nearly apologized. I find self-absorption in others an undesirable trait, but rather than condemn them, I censure myself. So, I sought refuge in my cousin who had suddenly become an arsenal of questions. His speech was giddy, and he had the kind of voice that might make a dog tilt its head, trying to parse the words it could not understand. Donovan’s face was eager and bright, like a stately fir decorated for Christmas. His eyes shone like silver ornaments. His full lips were shiny garlands, and his voice had a provocative quality that made you feel as if something extraordinary were about to happen.

I told him all about the family back home.

“How much do they miss me?” he asked, clasping his hands together like a child about to receive a gift.

“Everyone is sitting shiva. All the mirrors are draped in cloth, and no one eats anything but eggs.”

“Fabulous! Fallon, let’s visit Oberlin soon.” Then as if the notion somehow connected, “Carry, my love, you have to see our little bundle of joy.”

“Well, show me.”

“My God, he’s a toddler. And you’ve never seen him, you bore. He’s sleeping anyway.”

“Can’t I just take a peek?”

“You’ve waited this long, Carry Iverson so another hour won’t—”

Fallon Macandeior had been sulking near the counter. She strutted across the room and pinched my neck.

“Where are you working now, Carry?”

“I’m a campaign manager for a watchdog firm.”

“Christ, of course, you are. Which one?”

“Greater Together.”

“They can’t be that great. I’ve never heard of them.”

“You should be grateful for that. But stay in Austin long enough, and you’ll hear about us.”

“Long enough? Is that a challenge?” she asked, glaring at Donovan and then inching closer to my face. “Where the fuck else would I live, Carry?”

It was here that Mr. Safran sat up and said, “Serve that tea, hunty!” I was too stunned to realize that this was the first time he had spoken since I arrived. He inched his hips off the couch and stood.

“I’m hard as a corpse, and not in a good way. I’ve been vegging here too long.”

“Whose fault is that?” Donovan said. “I’ve tried to get you to go into Austin with me all day.”

“And do what? Boy watch? Shop for something your wife *doesn’t* own? I’ll pass,” said Mr. Safran to no one but the chilled martini glistening in front of him. “I gotta werk. And thank you, Fallon dear, for the drink.”

Donovan's cheeks flattened, and he stuck out his lips.

"You? Work?" Fallon slurped her cocktail like a cow at a stock tank.

I wondered where it was that Mr. Safran "werked." It was a pleasure to look at him. He was slim, with a boyish chest and face, and a spectacular posture which he highlighted by keeping his head in line with his shoulders. His silver-gray eyes glinted like polished hematite. He observed me with those eyes with a diplomatic grace.

"So you're over *there* on Emerald Bluff," he said, his tone underlining the separateness of our respective locales. "I know someone else who lives there."

"Do you?" I cleared my throat to swallow the rising inadequacy. "I just moved here. I don't know anyone, really."

"Darling, you *have* to know Jacobi."

"Jacobi?" said Donovan, startled. "Which Jacobi?"

Fallon interrupted to inform us the staff was ready to serve dinner. She locked her arm around mine and flexed her muscle, nearly dragging me from the sitting room in the way soldiers carry their wounded off the battlefield. The two men followed us, also arm in arm, out to a stone-paved deck surrounded by gravel, oak trees, soft white loungers, and a hand-carved table next to a flaming fire pit.

"Who lit the fire?" Donovan asked, nose wrinkled. He told one of the staff to turn it off. "The hottest days of the summer are here." Disgust left his face as quickly as the fire went out. "Don't you just bitch about the hottest days and then want them right back at the first freeze?"

"When did you quit enjoying winter?" I asked.

“I miss the snow, but I can do without the cold.” I caught Donovan flashing his eyes at Fallon just then.

“Girls, we need to do something while I’m here.” Mr. Safran held his head in his hands as if the world suddenly stopped spinning.

“Yes, we do,” said Donovan. The white candle on the table appeared dim compared to his radiant face. “Like what? Any ideas?” He turned to me for input. “What would you like to do, Carry, since you’re finally in Austin?”

Donovan gasped. “Oh my god, my hand is bruised.”

All of us inspected his hand dutifully.

“Fallon, you really hurt me,” he said. “Even if it was an accident, now I’m all black and blue. Guess those are the dues for marrying a cunning, unique, nervy, and talented—”

“Do not use cunning when talking about me,” Fallon said with one hand on her hip. Her long finger jabbed at Donovan. “Even if you’re being playful. Got it?”

“Cunning,” repeated Donovan, giving Fallon a half-smile.

Donovan and Mr. Safran talked over each other during dinner, producing a counterpoint of melodies and harmonies with varying rhythms and tempos. It was not off-putting in the least. The rapport between them, a giddy-eyed, choreographed flirtation, was expansive enough for Fallon and me to feel included, even entertained now and then.

“I feel like a savage around you now, Donovan.” Perhaps the third glass of Shiraz acted on me like a truth serum. “Don’t you remember anything about farming or playing corn hole?”

“That was a different life,” he said. “Our circle is a mélange of chichi classist twits who would be mortified by corn hole.”

I was just toying with him, but Fallon found her soapbox and went with it.

“We’re losing our goddamn society thanks to mindless people like that. Groups like Black Lives Matter, the Men’s Rights movement, Arab Springs, for fuck’s sake! We *all* matter. Have you heard of the Aryan Renaissance Society?”

“No, Fallon, I haven’t. And I wouldn’t.”

“You should look into it, Iverson. You’re an Oberlin man. You should be on top of these social issues. Greater Together, isn’t that right?”

“I think Fallon has lost the plot. And when she’s drunk,” said Donovan, grief washing over his face, “she becomes much more expressive with her ideas,” and then his voice trailed off.

“The theories are sound. They’re backed by science and research,” Fallon shot back. She crossed her arms and tapped her finger on her elbow. “Groups like the ARS have figured out how to keep things balanced. I’m not suggesting we do a repeat of Germany, fuck forbid.”

“So what? We control the non-whites by passing oppressive laws?” countered Donovan.

“You need to get out more, Fallon, and stop throwing shade. Air out that brain a little, honey,” said Mr. Safran.

Fallon leaned hard on the table. “Our people came from Vikings. Well, all of us except *you*, Safran.”

Mr. Safran winked at me. (Here is as good a place as any to mention that Donovan was born an Iverson, of course. But Fallon insisted he take her last name, which was a boost for him all the way around.)

“If it weren’t for the Vikings, we wouldn’t have the fine arts, mathematics, the foundations of society. *We* have to maintain the balance,” Fallon said.

The slender warrior-queen had morphed into an ogre before my eyes. She turned my stomach. I was about to launch into a full-on debate when the butler told her she had a call waiting in the office. She shoved her chair from the table with a huff and went inside, the butler trailing her. Fallon's departure freed something inside Donovan, and he leaned his face toward me, our cheeks almost pressing. "I deeply love having you at this table right now, Carry. You're a cherub, a total cherub. Isn't he?" He leaned into Mr. Safran. "A totally handsome cherub?"

I wanted to renounce what he'd said. No part of me was cherubic. He was inventing praise out of thin air. Maybe it was the wine. Perhaps it was the stress from Fallon's racist homily. Whatever it was, something else moved him.

"Do you want to hear a secret about the butler?" Donovan asked.

"That's why I came tonight."

"Well, he wasn't always a butler. He used to be a psychic to celebrities in LA."

"Here comes the really sad part," said Mr. Safran.

"He was doing very well for himself until he gave one of his clients the bad news."

"What was the bad news?" I asked.

"The client drew a card from his tarot deck, and he told her she would lose everything: her husband, her lover, and all of her wealth. She put the word out that he was a fraud, and he never did a reading for that crowd again."

I held back a laugh. Mr. Safran put a hand on my shoulder.

"Be careful what you laugh at, darling. The butler can still read."

"That's a great idea," said Donovan, calling the butler over. "My cousin here would love it if you gave him a reading."

The butler stiffened his shoulders. "Is now the right time, sir?"

"Please, go get your cards."

He returned with a black wooden box. Donovan gestured for him to sit.

"Just a short reading, then. From the Major Arcana. Your name, sir?"

"Carry." I tried to turn the smirk on my face into a polite smile.

"Please, think of a question and shuffle the deck."

He scattered the cards onto a silk scarf and watched me. I moved them around aggressively, and then he collected them into a neat rectangle.

"Now, cut the deck in half, and I will lay down three cards."

The images made no sense to me, but the butler rubbed his nose and took a deep breath.

"I'm suspicious of The Fool and The Magician in this reading. Please indulge me and reshuffle the deck."

I repeated the shuffle and cut the deck. His mouth fell open, and his eyes were wide.

"This is quite unusual."

"What do they mean?" I asked.

Mr. Safran lit two cigarettes and handed one to Donovan.

"The Fool was upright after the first shuffle. Now it's reversed but in the same place, next to The Magician which has also now been reversed. And then we have The Hermit."

"I think you fucked," said Mr. Safran, which irritated me.

"The Fool in this position indicates where you have come from, your recent past. When it is upside down, it can mean that you haven't paid attention to your instincts and have held back from taking a chance on someone or something."

“Okay. That’s general enough I could plug any experience into that.”

“Cousin,” Donovan said. “Relax. Keep an open mind.”

The butler cleared his throat. “The card in the next position shows something coming in your future. The Magician could be a man or a woman, or even yourself. Notice his wand is drawing power from above, directed to his outstretched hand pointing to the earth. But this one, too, is reversed.”

“Meaning?”

“It most likely shows someone in your immediate future who abuses power and is blinded by fantasies. It’s a warning about getting too close.”

“Guilty!” Mr. Safran said, laughing. “Stay away from me, honey.”

“And the last card?”

“The Hermit represents the most probable outcome. He is also reversed, which is of some concern.”

“Why’s that?”

“Notice all three of the cards have wands. The Hermit’s wand is like a crutch, signifying the need for self-awareness. He also represents a withdrawal from society after a transition. But because he is reversed, it could mean an unhealthy withdrawal full of bitterness and distrust.”

Fallon yelled for the butler from inside. Then she started yelling into the phone.

Donovan suddenly sat his glass down hard enough to startle the butler. They both got up and marched inside.

I looked at Mr. Safran for an explanation. He glanced at me with empty eyes. “So, what do you think—”

“Sha!” Mr. Safran silenced me. A quiet but ardent conversation took place in the office facing the patio. Mr. Safran leaned back in his chair toward the direction of the confrontation. Fallon and Donovan’s volleys were like barking dogs, first muted and distant, then close and threatening. After a bit of silence, they started up again.

I cleared my throat. “So this Mr. Jacobi you mentioned—”

“Shut up, darling. I want to hear what’s going on.”

“Going on? What do you mean?”

“Oh, you don’t know?” asked Mr. Safran. “All of Austin knows.”

“Knows what?”

“Everyone knows that Fallon has a boy toy.”

“A boy toy?” I parroted back.

Mr. Safran nodded like a bobblehead.

“You’d think that sugar baby would know not to call her during dinner!”

The revelation hadn’t begun to sink in before there was the crunch of gravel, and Fallon and Donovan took their seats.

“Ah, when duty calls!” said Donovan, voice strained.

He scanned Mr. Safran and then me. “Even though the sun has set, it’s still a gorgeous night. I think I even saw a cauldron of bats just over there near the beach. It’s a gorgeous night, isn’t it, Fallon?”

“Fucking gorgeous,” she said.

“The butler gave Carry a reading. Do you want to hear what he said? It sounds—”

“It sounds like bullshit. Iverson, after dinner, you and I are going down to the stables.”

The phone rang again. It shook us all like a peal of thunder. Donovan's chest caved, and the color left his face, as did the idea of the stables or any more talk about the tarot cards. As I was trying to put together the pieces of the puzzle I'd gathered that evening, I noticed the fire pit had been re-lit. But why? I wanted to look away from it, but I didn't want to see everyone so plainly. What was going through Fallon and Donovan's minds? I was able to steal a glance at Mr. Safran who was fingering the rim of his glass with his pinkie. Not even he, worldly Mr. Safran, could ignore this clanging intrusion into our affair. Had this not involved Donovan, I might have been amused—but my hand remained near the phone in my pocket should there be an emergency.

Fallon walked back into the house. Mr. Safran followed several steps behind her. Donovan and I walked side by side, unhurried, as though we were approaching something we wanted to avoid. We stopped at the porch on the side of the house and sat down on an iron-work settee.

Donovan ran his fingers over the stubble on his face. His eyes came to rest on the dark lake.

"You know, Carry, for cousins, you and I are almost strangers. How many events in my life have you missed? The wedding. The birth of my son."

"I went through some hard times after I graduated from Oberlin."

"Well, my life has been shit, and that's the truth."

If the intrusion tonight was any indication, who could argue with him? I retreated to safer territory. "So, how is the little one? Eating well and all that?"

“Of course.” He kept his eyes on the lake, speaking into the darkness. “Should I tell you what came out of my mouth when he was born?”

“If you want.”

“It’s quite revealing, Carry. Goes to my state of mind. Fallon wouldn’t allow me in the room for the birth, said it was undignified. Hours later, I found a nurse and asked him if I had a son or a daughter. He said it was a boy, and I cried. Hard. Do you know why I cried?”

“The overwhelming joy?” I guessed.

Donovan blew something out of his mouth, part laughter and part disgust. “No. I cried because I let go of any hope I had for him in this world then and there. Best case, he turns out to be a handsome, charming idiot because that’s what men are expected to be. Worst case, he becomes something like me. The world is a shitty place, and everyone knows it.”

“But Donovan, what about—”

“Carry, I love you, but you’re so provincial. I’ve been around the world and I never discovered anything new.” He sneered, giving me a look that reminded me of Fallon. “I’m so god damned cultured, aren’t I?”

He quit speaking. I knew what he was saying was a lie. But his confession—hell, the entire dinner affair—seemed to be a conspiracy to trap me into some cult. My stomach rolled as though something black and earthy needed to be let out. At that moment, his beautiful face darkened, and he leered at me in the way a con knows he has duped his mark.



Mr. Safran and Fallon were in the large living room at the far end of the house. Safran was sitting with his back to the fire, leafing through a photo book about Louis Vuitton. Fallon was standing at the large window tinkering with a high-tech telescope, the reflection of the flames dancing across its sleek, white surface.

When we crossed the room to sit next to Mr. Safran, he slammed the book shut and set it on the sofa next to him, and bolted upright in one motion.

“It’s late, and this bad boy needs his beauty sleep.”

“Levi has a match tomorrow,” said Donovan. “He’s gearing up for the world championship.”

“What sort of championship?” I asked.

“Levi has his blackbelt in Krav Maga.” Donovan made a chopping gesture through the air. “He almost won the junior championship a few years ago.”

“Well, off to bed for me, darlings. Sweet dreams, Mr. Iverson. See you when I see you.”

Levi looked back at me over his shoulder. He lingered a little too long, the way a politician stared you down until he’s sure he’s won your vote.

“But, of course, you’ll see him. And often. The two of you will be best of friends, kikis, even if I have to force you both.”

“What’s that, Don? You’re slurring your words. Bye, Felicia,” Mr. Safran said to him, slinking his hand up the stair rail.

“Safran is a good person,” said Fallon. “But they shouldn’t let him roam so freely.”

“Who shouldn’t?” asked Donovan.

“Don’t be dense.”

“His family has all but a foot in the crypt already. What do they know? Anyway, I think Carry and Levi will spend a lot of time together out here this summer. And the lake and the sun will do them both some good.”

Donovan and Fallon assessed each other quickly and silently. I thought I saw them nod.

“Is he from Austin?” I blurted out.

“Columbus, Ohio. We shared our fabulous childhood together there.”

“Did you bring Carry around on that subject?” asked Fallon.

“Oh, on the porch, darling? Yes, I pounded him hard about the superiority of the Vikings and all that.”

“It went in one ear and out the other,” I said. They walked me to the driveway and held hands in some sort of perverse complicity. When I started up my SUV, Donovan waved his hands and yelled, “Wait, Carry! I have to ask you something. Fallon and I heard that you had gotten serious with a boy back home.”

“Oh, yeah, we did hear that. It was almost an engagement, was it not?” asked Fallon.

“It’s all rumors.”

“No, we heard it from all around. There has to be a nugget of truth in it,” said Donovan.

You can leave your state, but you can never leave social media. I won’t quit a relationship because of gossip, but I would not let rumors define me. It was nothing like an engagement. As an institution, I objected to marriage and its Judeo-Christian origins. As an idea, well, I didn’t consider myself the marrying type.

But their curiosity about me made me feel like I mattered to them and made them seem less untouchable. As I drove home, though, I felt more confused about the night’s revelations.

Why didn't Donovan just leave her? That was more puzzling than Fallon bedding a boy in Austin. Obviously, the monotony of motherhood had already set in, and she was starving for something more virile to control.

When I arrived back at my cottage on Emerald Bluff, I parked the SUV and sat in the yard. An owl hooted nearby. Achilles' silhouette moved across the front window; he was probably hungry. I thought I'd seen a meteor flash right to left across the sky, and it was then I felt another presence. Pale from the moonlight, he was like an apparition stepping out of the shadow of his mansion. He was watching the sky as well. He slipped his hands into his pockets and took a step, soundless, secure. It was Jacobi.

Since Mr. Safran had brought him up at dinner, I figured this was a low-key way to introduce myself. But I stopped. He looked so comfortable there by himself. And then he stretched his hand out toward the black lake. His fingers shook. I looked in the direction where he was reaching but saw nothing except the luminescent fountain on the Macandeior's hill. I had seen it earlier from up close. The wide basin was Italian marble, and in polished copper, Apollo, facing east, rises from the water to greet the new morning in his chariot drawn by four horses. Cherubs herald his arrival with trumpets. A single spout of water, illuminated by white lights, shoots several feet into the air. When I turned back to Jacobi, he was gone, and it was me who was alone in the restless dark.