



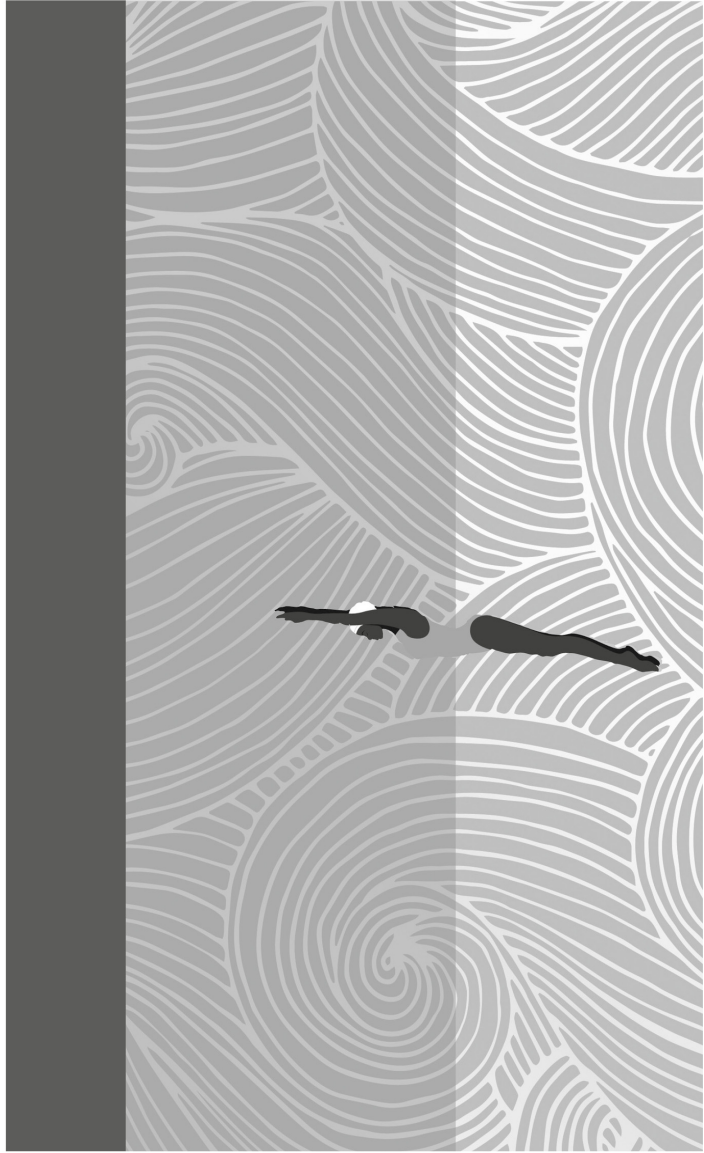
BLACK

CAKE

a novel

CHARMAINE

WILKERSON





*BLACK
CAKE*

*A
Novel*

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WILKERSON*



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PROLOGUE

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THEN

1965

HE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN IT would come to this. He should have known the day that *hak gwai* wife of his ran away from home. Should have known the day he saw his daughter swimming in the bay as a storm bore down on her. Should have known when his parents dragged him to this island and changed their names. He stood at the water's edge, now, watching the waves crash white against the rocks, waiting for his daughter's body to wash ashore.

A policeman beckoned to him. The policeman was a girl. He'd never seen one of those before. She was holding a fluff of white fabric, his daughter's wedding dress, smeared with black cake and lilac icing. She must have dropped the cake on herself as she jumped up from the table. He remembered a clattering of plates, the splintering of glass on the tile floor, someone crying out. When he looked toward his daughter, she was gone and her satin-covered shoes lay strewn on the lawn outside like tiny capsized boats.



*PART
ONE*

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Now

2018

SHE'S HERE.

Byron hears the elevator doors peel open. His first instinct is to rush toward his sister and embrace her. But when Benny leans in to hug him, Byron pushes her away, then turns to knock on the door to the attorney's office. He feels Benny put a hand on his arm. He shakes it free. Benny stands there, her mouth open, but says nothing. And what right does she have to say *anything*? Byron hasn't seen Benny in eight years. And now, their ma is gone for good.

What does Benny expect? She took a family argument and turned it into a cold war. Never mind all that talk about societal rejection and discrimination and *whatnot*. It seems to Byron that whatever kind of problem you have in this world, you can find someone to show you understanding. And times are changing. There's even been a study in the news recently about people like Benny.

People like Benny.

The study says it can be a lonely road for people like her. But she won't be getting any sympathy from Byron, no. Benedetta Bennett gave up that luxury years ago when she turned her back on her family, even though she

claims it was the other way around. At least she showed up this time. Six years ago, Byron and his mother sat in the church across from his father's coffin up in L.A. County, waiting for Benny to arrive, but no Benny. Later, Byron thought he saw his sister skirting the burial grounds in the back of a car. She'd be there any minute, he thought. But, still, no Benny. Only a text from her later, saying *I'm sorry*. Then silence. For months at a time. Then years.

As each year went by, he was less certain that Benny had been there that day or that he'd ever had a sister to begin with.

That he'd ever had a chubby, squiggle-headed baby girl following him around the house.

That she'd ever cheered him on at the national meets.

That he'd ever heard her voice sailing across the auditorium as he closed his hand around his doctoral diploma.

That he'd ever *not* felt the way he does right now. Orphaned and pissed as hell.

Benny

HER MOTHER'S ATTORNEY OPENS THE door and Benny looks past him, half expecting to see her ma sitting in the room. But it's only Benny and Byron now, and Byron won't even look at her.

The lawyer is saying something about a message from their mother but Benny can't concentrate, she's still looking at Byron, at the bits of gray in his hair that didn't use to be there. What's with the pushing, anyway? The man is forty-five years old, not ten. In all these years, her big brother has never shoved her, never hit her, not even when she was little and tended to pounce and bite like a puppy.

Benny's first memory of Byron: They are sitting on the couch, she is settled under her brother's arm, and Byron is reciting adventure stories to her from a book. His feet can already touch the floor. Byron stops to fluff Benny's hair with his fingers, to pull on her earlobes, to pinch her nostrils shut, to tickle her until she is breathless with laughter, until she is dying of happiness.

The Message

THEIR MOTHER HAS LEFT THEM a message, the lawyer says. The lawyer's name is Mr. Mitch. He's talking to Byron and Benny as though he's known them all their lives, though Byron can only recall meeting him one other time, when his ma needed help getting around town after her accident last winter, the one his friend Cable insisted wasn't an accident. Byron walked his mother up to Mr. Mitch's office, then went back outside to wait for her in the car. He was sitting there watching some kids skateboard down the broad, buff-toned sidewalks between one high-end chain store and the next, when a police officer rapped on his side window.

This kind of thing had happened to Byron so often over the course of his adult life that sometimes he forgot to be nervous. But most times, whenever he was approached or pulled over by an officer, he slid down into that space between one heartbeat and the next where he could hear his blood crashing through his body, a waterfall carrying centuries of history with it, threatening to wipe out the ground on which he stood. His research, his books and social media following, the speaking engagements, the scholarship he wanted to fund, all of it, could be gone in a split second of misunderstanding.

Only later, after the officer had opened the trunk of his patrol car and come back with a copy of Byron's latest book (*Could he have an autograph?*), did it occur to Byron that a grown man of any color, sitting alone in a car watching pre-adolescents skateboard up and down the sidewalk, could elicit a reasonable degree of suspicion. All right, he could see that, it wasn't always about him being a black man. Though, mostly, it was.

"Let me just warn you," Mr. Mitch is saying now. "About your mother. You need to be prepared."

Prepared?

Prepared for what? Their mother is already gone.

His ma.

He doesn't see how anything after that is going to make much of a difference.

B and B

THERE'S AN ENTIRE FILE BOX labeled *ESTATE OF ELEANOR BENNETT*. Mr. Mitch pulls out a brown paper envelope with their mother's handwriting on it and puts it on the desk in front of Byron. Benny shifts her seat closer to Byron's and leans in to look. Byron removes his hand but leaves the packet where Benny can see it. Their ma has addressed the envelope to *B and B*, the moniker she liked to use whenever she wrote or spoke to them together.

B-and-B notes were usually pinned to the fridge door with a magnet. *B and B, there's some rice and peas on the stove. B and B, I hope you left your sandy shoes at the door. B and B, I love my new earrings, thank you!*

Ma only called them Byron or Benny when she was speaking with one sibling or the other, and she only called Benny *Benedetta* when she was upset.

Benedetta, what about this report card? Benedetta, don't talk to your father that way. Benedetta, I need to talk to you.

Benedetta, please come home.

Their mother left a letter, Mr. Mitch says, but most of their mother's last message is contained in an audio file that took her more than eight hours, over four days, to record.

"Go ahead," Mr. Mitch says, nodding at the packet.

Byron cuts open the envelope and shakes out its contents, a USB drive and a handwritten note. He reads the note out loud. It's so typically *Ma*.

B and B, there's a small black cake in the freezer for you. Don't throw it out.

Black cake. Byron catches himself smiling. Ma and Dad used to share a slice of cake every year to mark their anniversary. It wasn't the original wedding cake, they said, not anymore. Ma would make a new one every five years or so, one layer only, and put it in the freezer. Still, she insisted that any black cake, steeped as it was in rum and port, could have lasted the full length of their marriage.

I want you to sit down together and share the cake when the time is right. You'll know when.

Benny covers her mouth with one hand.

Love, Ma.

Benny starts to cry.

Benny

BENNY HASN'T CRIED IN YEARS. At least, she hadn't, until last week, after being fired from her afternoon gig back in New York. At first, she thought her boss was being crabby because he'd seen Benny thumbing her smartphone while taking customer calls. There was a rule against that sort of thing, but there was a message from her mother. Four words that she just couldn't shake out of her head.

Actually, the message had been in her voicemail for a month already, but just then, Benny had been looking at her cellphone, wondering what to do. She hadn't really spoken to her mother in years. Not talking to your own ma for that long took a certain kind of gall, Benny knew. But so did not standing by your own daughter when she'd needed you most.

For years, it had been easier for Benny simply to stay away, to not respond to the rare message from back home, to steel herself against every birthday and holiday away from her family, to tell herself that this was a form of self-care. In her weaker moments, she'd plug in the old digital photo frame that she kept under some sketchbooks in a desk drawer and watch as a series of smiling faces that she'd thought would always be part of her life popped onto the screen, one after the other, then off again.

One of Benny's favorite pics showed her with Byron and Dad, arms linked and dressed in black tie for some event, the kind of fundraiser or tribute or gathering of lawyers at which her father had often taken the lectern. The resemblance between the three of them was striking, even to Benny, who had grown up with this fact. And from the identical light in their eyes, you could tell who had been taking the photograph. Her ma.

Benny's boss was raising his voice at her now.

"You weren't doing your job," he said.

Benny slipped her phone into the pocket of her cardigan.

"Your job is to read from the goddamned script. Your job is not to volunteer social commentary on the durability of consumer electronics!"

Oh, that. Not the phone.

By the time Benny figured out what her supervisor was talking about, she was out of a job.

Benny was still dry-eyed when she walked out of the call center with the only personal items she'd kept in her shared cubicle: a coffee mug with stained, fractured insides and a fringy-looking plant. What kind of plant it was, Benny could not recall, but it had never let her down. Nothing seemed to deter it, not a lack of water, not fluorescent lighting, not the plastic-smelling office air, not her supervisor's noxious language. Every once in a while, she would lift the plant's tiny stems with her fingertips and wipe the dust from its fronds with a damp cloth, just so.

It was fifteen minutes before Benny realized that she had taken the wrong bus. She got off at the next stop and found herself standing in front of an old coffee shop with fake-pine garlands and fake-velvet bows on its doors. She hadn't realized this kind of place still existed in the city. At the sight of the spray-on-imitation-frost lettering spelling out *Happy Holidays* across the plate-glass window, at the thought of yet another year without having a coffee shop of her own to run (though with less kitsch), at the sight of a young father inside the café kneeling down to button his child into a puffy, lilac-colored jacket and tucking her dark hair into the lilac fur-lined hood, Benny burst into tears. Benny had never liked lilac.

The Recording

MR. MITCH TAKES THE MEMORY stick with Eleanor Bennett's recording and inserts it into his desktop computer. Eleanor's children lean forward in their seats when they hear her voice. Mr. Mitch wills himself to keep a placid face, breathes deep and slow. This is not personal, this is professional. Families need their attorneys to stay unruffled.

B and B, Mr. Mitch is recording this for me. My hand is not so steady anymore and I have a lot to say. I wanted to talk to you both in person but, at this point, I'm not sure I'll get to see you two together again.

Benny and Byron both shift in their seats.

You are stubborn children, but you are good children.

Mr. Mitch keeps his eyes focused on the notepad on his desk, but he can still feel the air shifting in the room. A stiffening of backs, a squaring of shoulders.

B and B, promise me you'll try to get along. You can't afford to lose each other.

Benny stands up. *Here we go.* Mr. Mitch pauses the recording.

"I don't need to hear this," Benny says.

Mr. Mitch nods. Waits a moment. "It's what your mother wanted," he says.

"Can't you make me a copy of the file?" Benny says. "Make me a copy. I'll take it back to New York."

"Your mother expressly requested that you listen to this together, all the way through, in my presence. But you know, we don't have to stay in the office. If you prefer, we could stop now and I could bring the recording to your mother's house at a later time. Would you like that?"

"No," Byron says. "I want to hear this now." Benny scowls at Byron, but he doesn't look at her.

"Your mother was very specific," Mr. Mitch says. "We need to listen to this together, so I'm happy to continue this when both of you can make yourselves available." He opens an agenda on his desk. "I could come by the house late this afternoon or tomorrow morning."

"I don't see how it's going to make a difference to Ma now, anyway," Benny says. Still standing, she looks down at Mr. Mitch with steady eyes but her voice wobbles on the word *Ma*.

"I think it will make a difference to you and your brother," Mr. Mitch says. "There are things your mother wanted you to hear right away, things you need to know."

Benny lowers her head, stays there for a minute, huffs out a breath. "Better this afternoon," she says. "I'll be leaving town right after the funeral." Benny looks at Byron one more time but he keeps his eyes fixed on the desk. She walks out of the room without saying goodbye, her blondish Afro puff quivering as she stomps across the waiting room, pulls the door open, and steps into the darkened hallway.

Mr. Mitch hears the faint chime of the elevator down the hall and Byron stands up.

"Well, I guess I'll see you later," Byron says. "Thank you."

Mr. Mitch gets up to shake his hand. Byron's phone buzzes and by the time he reaches the door, his cellphone is already clapped to his ear. There must have been a time, Mr. Mitch thinks, when Byron was just a kid, trawling the beach, more interested in putting a conch shell to his ear than anything like a phone.

"My son listens to the sea for a living, can you imagine?" Eleanor said to Mr. Mitch one day, back in the days when her husband Bert was still alive and they were at some lawyers' event together.

"It's actually a job!" Bert quipped. They had a good chuckle together over that one. Eleanor and Bert had a way of doing that, being funny together.

Maybe, when all this was over, Mr. Mitch could ask Byron about his latest project, about how the institute he works for is helping to map the seafloor. The oceans are a challenge, Mr. Mitch thinks. And what about a person's life? How do you make a map of that? The borders people draw between themselves. The scars left along the ground of one's heart. What will Byron have to say about that, once he and his sister have heard their mother's message?

Homecoming

BENNY LETS HERSELF INTO HER mother's house through the back door and stands in the kitchen, listening. She hears her mother's voice, hears her own laughter, smells clove in the air, but sees only a dishcloth folded over a chair, two prescription pill bottles sitting on a counter. There's no sign of Byron. She walks into the living room. It is silky with light, even at this hour. Her dad's armchair is still there, the blue fabric nubby in spots where Bert Bennett once sat. The last time Benny saw him, he stood up from that chair, turned his back on her, and walked out of the room.

Hard to believe it was eight years ago.

Benny had been trying to explain herself. She'd sat down next to her father, though not without great embarrassment. After all, who wanted to have a talk with their parents about sex? Though this wasn't only about the sex, that was the whole point. Benny had taken way too long to get around to this conversation and it had cost her, big-time.

Benny remembers running her hand back and forth over the crushed-velvet sofa that day, murmuring a compliment. Her mother had kept the seat encased in a plastic covering all those years that Benny and Byron were growing up and long after that. It was the first time that Benny had seen the sofa this way. She couldn't get over the feel of it, how it could be so soft and ridgy at the same time.

"We just woke up one morning and realized we're not going to live forever," her mother said, touching the sofa. "It's time we enjoyed it." Benny smiled and petted her end of the seat like a stuffed toy. The sofa was still an ugly thing to look at, its brassy fibers glinting in the light, but just the feel of it under Benny's fingers helped to calm her nerves as her father began to raise his voice.

When she was little, Ma and Dad used to tell her that she could be anything she wanted to be. But as she grew into a young woman, they began to say things like *We made sacrifices so that you could have the best*. Meaning, the best was what they envisioned for Benny, not what she wanted for herself. Meaning, the best was something that, apparently, Benny was not. Letting go of a scholarship at a prestigious university was not. Taking cooking and art classes instead was not. Working precarious jobs with the hope of opening a café was not. And Benny's love life? That, most certainly, was not.

Benny walks over to the sofa now and sits down next to her father's empty chair, placing a hand on the armrest. She leans in and sniffs at the tweedy upholstery, searching for a hint of the hair oil that her father used to use, that green, old-style stuff that could fuel a pickup truck. Benny would give anything now to have her parents here, sitting in their favorite chairs, even if it meant they might still have trouble understanding her.

Benny finds herself smiling, now, thinking of a different time in this room. Her mother, perching her rear on the arm of this sofa, watching MTV with teenaged Benny and her friends while Benny kept hoping Ma would remember she had grown-up things to do and scoot. Ma had always seemed different from the mothers of other kids. Super athletic, a bit of a math wiz, and yes, a fan of music videos. The whole music thing was something that Benny, in her thirteenth year, had found somewhat embarrassing. It seemed Ma was always doing things her way. Except when it came to Benny's dad.

Benny's phone is pinging. It's Steve. He's left a voice message. He's heard the news. So sorry, he says, though he never knew her ma. He's thinking, maybe they should get together, when Benny gets back to the East Coast. Steve's voice is low and soft, and Benny feels the old stirring of the skin along her shins, just as she did the last time he called.

Benny and Steve. They've gone back and forth like this for years, now. Every time, Benny promises herself it'll be the last. She never calls him back. But each time, there has come a moment when she's finally answered Steve's phone calls, when Steve has made her laugh, when she's agreed to meet him.

Steve's laughter, Steve's voice, Steve's touch. Years ago, these things had helped to pull Benny out of the muck of her breakup with Joanie. She had followed Joanie all the way to New York from Arizona, though later she was forced to admit that Joanie had never given her a reason to think that they would get back together. So there Benny was, a few months later, staring down at her boots in the music section of a bookstore in Midtown, when Steve came up to her.

Steve wiggled his fingers in front of Benny's face and she looked up to see this gorgeous block of a man with a broad smile, pointing to his headphones, eyebrows raised, then pointing to the console where she was plugged in. Benny smiled and nodded. Steve plugged his headphones into the jack near hers and, at the sound of the music, he nodded his head and laughed silently.

By the time they stepped out into the slushy streets together, Benny had begun to feel that maybe she was still made of all of those things that Joanie once saw in her and that maybe someone else could see them, too. It would be a while before Benny would realize that Steve, her music-loving, yacht-sailing new lover, could make her feel as threatened as he could make her feel desired.