

IT'S NOT OVER. IT'S TIME.

# THE CHANGE

*A Novel*

KIRSTEN MILLER

# THE CHANGE

*a novel*



KIRSTEN MILLER

*wm*

WILLIAM MORROW

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*



# Dedication

*For Erica Waldrop, my lifelong friend and inspiration, who was always the  
baddest witch around*

## Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Dedication*

Gone to Seed

Hot and Bothered

The Quiet Life

Josephine Levison's Thirty-Year War

The Girl in Blue

The Purification of Harriett Osborne

The Twins

Hurling Begonias

Why Amber Craig Turned to Arson

They Walk Among Us

Culling Pointe

The Chief

Picket Fences

On Top of the World

Claude Marchand Plays Her Hand

The Spark

Laverne Douglass Gets What She's Owed

Faith

Rosamund Harding Wasn't Herself

Invasive Species

Going Rogue

Where Do All the Girls Go?

Jo Sets a Bridge Ablaze  
Whatever It Takes  
The First and Last Time Mandy Welsh Broke a Promise  
Mayday  
*Newsnight*  
Wolves in Sheep's Clothing  
The Day Harriett Finally Opened Her Eyes  
Whales  
The Others  
Defiled  
Éminence Grise  
Juliet Rocca's Last Dish  
Part Three  
The Voices  
When Faith Reid's Serpent Held Its Tongue  
The Monster  
Burn It Down  
Epilogue  
  
*Acknowledgments*  
*About the Author*  
*Copyright*  
*About the Publisher*

## Gone to Seed

No one had seen the woman who lived at 256 Woodland Drive since early November. Now it was late April and the house looked abandoned. A modern masterpiece, set back from the road and surrounded by gardens, it had once been the neighborhood's biggest attraction. Real estate brokers ferrying clients contemplating a move to the suburbs had gone out of their way to drive past it. Now the gardens had grown wild and a gutter dangled from the roof. The children across the street speculated that the owner, like so many unfortunate old ladies before her, had probably been eaten by cats. Their mother assured them that couldn't have happened as she cast a worried look at the family pet.

The owner's name was Harriett Osborne, and though she wasn't new to the neighborhood, few people on Woodland Drive could claim to know her. For over a decade, she and her husband had left for work early each morning, and if they returned, it was late at night. The two would vanish completely for days at a time, but while they were gone, the house rarely seemed empty. Twice a week at nine on the dot, a small army of cleaners and gardeners descended on the property. The curtains on the tall street-facing windows were yanked open and the house's interior was revealed to all. Cars passing by often slowed or pulled over. The house developed a significant social media following after influencers christened it a monument to good taste.

When the Osbornes were profiled in the country's most prestigious shelter magazine, newsstand sales spiked in the vicinity of Mattauk, New York. The couple had no children or dogs that would have forced them to

engage with the community—and no desire to mingle with their neighbors at any of the coastal town’s seafood-themed festivals. So the residents of Mattauk made do with what little they could glean from the article. Chase Osborne was the chief creative officer at a Manhattan advertising agency best known for a long-running campaign that featured a family of talking pigs. Harriett Osborne ran a rival company’s new business department. They both appeared to be well-preserved specimens in their mid- to late forties. Chase had a tattoo on his neck and wore his blue suit without socks. Harriett’s chunky black glasses framed intelligent eyes, and her matte red lipstick drew attention to a subtle smirk. When the attractive pair weren’t off traveling the world, they split their time between their house in Mattauk and an equally stunning penthouse in Williamsburg. The Osbornes, the author of the article more than implied, were leading the kind of life readers should have been living.

Then, at some point in September, the cleaners and gardeners failed to arrive for work at the Osborne house. They were no-shows later that week as well. Once the neighbors began comparing notes, it became clear that Chase Osborne hadn’t been home in a month. Not long after, on the night before Halloween, a blond woman was spotted walking up Woodland Drive in a rain-drenched velvet skirt with no coat to cover it, her feet barefoot and a pair of three-inch Acne pumps in her hands. It wasn’t until she pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the front door that the witnesses realized it was Harriett Osborne.

After that, the interior of 256 Woodland remained hidden from view—and so did Harriett. She wasn’t dead yet. Passersby often spotted a shadowy figure in the garden at night. When the sun was shining, she received regular visitors. The UPS man arrived every day but Sunday and deposited a mound of boxes outside her door. They would wait there for hours until no one was watching, and then somehow disappear all at once. On Tuesdays and Fridays, a young man from the grocery store would show up like clockwork at six fifteen P.M., his arms loaded with paper bags. The door would open, and he would step over the threshold, only to emerge precisely one hour later with empty hands.

**I**t was on just such an evening at seven fifteen that Jeremy Aversano happened to be walking a borrowed cockapoo past the Osbornes’ house. He let the dog root around in the foliage while the delivery boy backed out of



Harriett's drive. Just as the car reached the curb, Jeremy waved to the young man and gestured for him to stop. The window lowered and Jeremy leaned over with an avuncular smile.

"Yeah?" The delivery boy was twentysomething and movie star handsome.

"Everything okay in there?" Jeremy asked.

The young man grinned broadly, revealing an impressive assortment of teeth. "What?" He sounded both confused and amused. The vehicle reeked of pot.

"The lady inside—she doing all right?"

"You're eighty feet from her door, bro. Why don't you ask her?"

After a moment of stunned silence, Jeremy shook off his embarrassment. The kid was clearly a moron. "Forget it. Sorry to bother you."

Jeremy stepped back from the window and waited for the car to drive away. Then he looked up at the house. The sun had dipped below the horizon, but as usual, the house lights hadn't turned on. In the growing darkness, the abundant foliage felt primal and threatening. God only knew what it might be hiding. Jeremy's wife had recently filed for divorce, and their house at 261 Woodland was now on the market. An eyesore just down the street would strip thousands off their asking price. Something had to be done.

Jeremy was on the verge of marching right up to the front door and offering to mow the lady's lawn himself. But when he tugged on the cockapoo's leash, the dog resisted. Its head was still stuck in the brambles that had sprung up around the Osborne woman's lawn. Annoyed, Jeremy gave the leash a yank. The dog yelped, but refused to budge, forcing him to reel it in like a fish. When the beast's head emerged, Jeremy realized there was something clamped between its jaws. The object was fleshy, faintly gray in color, and ended in five limp fingers. The dog, whose name he could never remember, dropped its discovery at Jeremy's feet.

Later, as he was speed-walking home, Jeremy made a mental list of the neighbors who might have seen him stumbling backward into the gutter while the dog mocked him with its slobbery grin. (As it turned out, only one person had witnessed the scene. Unfortunately, that person was a twelve-year-old with a popular TikTok account, whose video of the incident would break platform records.) After the tumble, which left his Dockers stained with sludge, Jeremy had crept toward the object with his palm poised to

shield his eyes. He was one hundred percent certain the dog's discovery had recently belonged to a human. Upon closer inspection, however, it appeared to be a species of mushroom. *A monstrosity*, Jeremy fumed as he cut across his own perfectly manicured lawn. If that was the kind of revolting fungus the Osborne woman was introducing to the neighborhood, the gloves would need to come off. It didn't matter *what* people whispered about her. He wasn't afraid to take her on. So as soon as he was safely inside his 1950s Cape Cod, Jeremy pulled out his phone and dialed an old friend, Brendon Baker.

Until March, Brendon Baker had never missed a meeting of the Mattauk Homeowners Association. His encyclopedic knowledge of the rules, and his fervor for enforcing them, had helped him rise from member to treasurer to president of the organization in record time. When he moved to Mattauk five years earlier, he'd been appalled by the town's lackadaisical approach to landscaping. In the spring, the grass on half the town's lawns had been allowed to grow far past the two-inch limit. In autumn, piles of leaves were left to molder for months. It took a single HOA gathering for Brendon to identify the problem. The board was composed of former stay-at-home moms who seemed far more interested in sourcing organic mulch for the playground or building beaches for babies than in enforcing regulations. When Brendon decided to run for a seat on the board, he went door-to-door every weekend, when he knew the husbands would be home. It was time, he convinced the men he met, for the HOA to finally get serious.

As soon as Brendon was elected president, he made good on his promise. Everyone he spoke with agreed that Mattauk had never looked better. Then, in March, complications from a hemorrhoid operation kept him home for a month. Brendon had never placed much faith in his HOA colleagues, and he knew work would pile up while he was away. But he'd never imagined that a dire situation like 256 Woodland Drive would remain unaddressed for so long.

His first day back from medical leave, Brendon walked into the HOA board meeting ten minutes late and dropped his leather messenger bag down on the table with a satisfying thump. Instead of claiming a seat, he crossed his arms over his fleshy chest and stood with his thighs pressed against the table's edge, displaying his crotch for the five women who'd been waiting. He'd done this often, even before his condition had made

sitting a challenge. His fellow board members couldn't be certain he chose the posture on purpose, but all agreed it was completely revolting.

As usual, there was no chitchat. Brendon preferred to get straight to business. "Have any of you been down Woodland Drive lately?" he barked at his colleagues.

They all had. Woodland Drive was a main route to the train station. But no one in the room spoke up. They'd known this moment was coming, and they'd made a pact.

Their silence only fed Brendon's indignation. "Does anyone here know"—he glanced down at his phone and the notes he'd taken—"a woman named Harriett Osborne?"

A couple pairs of eyes inadvertently darted in the same direction.

"Celeste?" Brendon asked.

"Yes, I know her." Celeste Howard had won a seat on the board the previous fall after her youngest had started kindergarten. She was a perfect example of the kind of woman the HOA attracted, Brendon thought. Her most recent work experience was limited to changing diapers and singing nursery rhymes. He suspected that just like the rest of them, Celeste had no real interest in community management. For her, the board was a social club—and a sad attempt to justify the fancy education she'd wasted.

"Is the Osborne woman a friend of yours?" he asked.

"Harriett used to work with my husband. I can't call us friends."

Celeste considered herself more of a secret admirer. Years earlier, when Celeste and her husband had started out in the advertising business, most of their equals had been women. Then Andrew was tapped on the shoulder to become the COO's latest protégé. The higher he rose, the less estrogen there seemed to be in the atmosphere. Harriett was one of the few women who never slipped or got shoved off the ladder. She managed to hold on far longer than Celeste had. In fact, for a while, everyone had assumed Harriett would be the company's first female president.

"Last night, I received an anonymous tip from one of Harriett Osborne's neighbors," Brendon announced. As a favor, he'd promised to keep Jeremy's name out of it. Situations such as these were likely to become emotionally charged. "I have to say, I had a hard time believing what the gentleman told me. So I drove past the house, and turns out, it was true. The place is a jungle. What the hell happened to all of the gardeners?"

The question was directed at Celeste. She knew he would wait until she responded. “It seems they’ve stopped showing up.”

“You think? And where is the husband?” Brendon asked. “My source says he hasn’t been in town since last fall.”

This time, Celeste refused to speak. She failed to see how Harriett’s marital status had anything to do with her lawn.

“He’s gone,” someone else confirmed. Chase Osborne was, by all accounts, living in the couple’s Brooklyn apartment with the head of his agency’s production department.

Brendon nodded as if everything suddenly made sense.

“I believe Harriett might be going through a bit of a rough patch,” Celeste offered. She wasn’t going to give him any more than that.

The previous October, Celeste’s husband, Andrew, claimed he’d seen two security officers drag Harriett Osborne out of the advertising agency where they worked and deposit her at the curb. Rumor had it that an altercation had taken place behind the closed doors of the CEO’s office. The promotion Harriett had been expecting hadn’t come through, and she hadn’t received the news gracefully. After hours, Andrew had peeked inside the office to confirm the stories he’d heard. The Cannes Lions and One Show pencils were back on the windowsill, but telltale gouges in the Sheetrock confirmed they had, indeed, been flung at the walls.

“I don’t understand. Why would they let her go?” Celeste knew she sounded like a fan whose idol had fallen. “You always said she was excellent.”

“And she is,” Andrew said. “But sometimes good’s not enough. The president is the face of the company. They decided to go with someone younger and fresher.” Celeste was on the verge of asking the obvious follow-up question when the grin on her husband’s face stopped her.

She gasped. “Oh my God, they chose you?”

“They did,” he confirmed.

She had to say something. “I had no idea you were in the running!”

“Neither did I!” He seemed so thrilled that she hadn’t had the heart to question their wisdom. Andrew was a decent account guy and a world-class schmoozer. But even she knew he was no Harriett Osborne.

It wasn’t until after the champagne had been popped, poured, and consumed that Celeste made it back to the question she’d intended to ask.

“How old is Harriett, anyway?”

“I dunno.” Andrew was already tipsy. “Forty-seven, maybe? Forty-eight?”

“You’re forty-four!” Celeste briefly teetered on the edge of panic. She’d been let go from her job while pregnant with their second child. After the baby was born, Andrew had encouraged her to take time off from her career to care for the kids. The family was now dependent on his salary. “Does that mean you could be out of a job in a few more years?”

Andrew chuckled as if the suggestion were silly. “Don’t worry about that, honey. It’s a bit different for men.” He reached out to stroke her cheek. When Celeste flinched, he must have realized he’d said the wrong thing. “It’s terrible, but it’s true. Now that I’m part of the leadership team, I’ll be doing my best to change things.”

Celeste was old enough to smell bullshit. She had recently turned forty-two.

In the six months since that moment, Andrew hadn’t been home much. His days ended later. The business trips lasted longer. He always apologized. The president of an ad agency had to work harder than anyone, he told her. Celeste knew it was a lie. He was fucking someone at his office. What upset her most was that he seemed to have forgotten she’d once been in advertising, too.

**A**s Brendon Baker turned his Subaru down Woodland Drive, he had to work hard to contain his excitement. Home visits were his favorite part of the job. During the workweek, he was at the mercy of clients and committees, on an endless, hopeless quest for consensus. As the president of the homeowners association, he’d made it clear that the buck stopped with him. One of his first acts had been to fine the elderly lady on Cedar Lane who was infamous for keeping her Christmas decorations up all year round. Eventually her lien grew so large that the HOA foreclosed. After that, Brendon’s word was law in Mattauk. He had the power to make people grovel if he wanted to—and he always did.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Celeste spoke up from the passenger seat. “I don’t want to go in.”

“It’s for your friend’s sake,” he reminded her. “It will be easier for Mrs. Osborne if another woman is there.”

“I told you, she and I aren’t friends.” Celeste knew he wanted her there in case Harriett cried. “I don’t even know if Harriett will remember me.” It might be even worse if she did.

“How many complaints about the Osborne property did we receive while I was out sick?” Brendon inquired. It was Celeste’s duty, as secretary, to keep track of them.

“A few,” Celeste admitted reluctantly. She’d stopped counting at twelve.

“Those calls could be a liability for you during the next election,” he said. “Things could get ugly if the Osborne woman isn’t dealt with expeditiously. Word will get out that you’re the one who let the situation spiral out of control, and by this time next year, you’ll be back to baking muffins for the PTA.”

Brendon parked along the curb in front of 256 Woodland. A line of rosebushes planted parallel to the street had grown to form an impenetrable bramble shot through with lovely red-stemmed sumac and glistening poison ivy leaves. Climbing vines scaled the house and hanging ferns of prehistoric proportions dripped over its roof, shielding the interior from view.

“How can it have gotten this bad so fast? The house looks like Grey Gardens, and it’s not even May.” He swiveled toward Celeste with a schadenfreude smirk. “This lady’s not going to come prancing out in a leotard with a scarf on her head, is she?”

Celeste didn’t dignify the question with an answer.

Brendon’s sense of humor vanished when his joke flopped. “All right, let’s get this over with,” he ordered.

Celeste stayed put. She was calculating the distance from 256 Woodland Drive to the car she’d left parked downtown. It was almost walkable, she thought. But not quite.

“Celeste?”

She didn’t want to know what had happened to Harriett. She wanted to remember Harriett as the person she’d been. She couldn’t bear to see another woman brought low. Alone and abandoned. Depressed and defeated. If it could happen to Harriett, it could happen to anyone. Celeste was terrified that when the front door opened, she’d see her own future.

“Let’s go,” Brendon ordered.

And she went.

Brendon rang the doorbell and Celeste held her breath. A bee touched down on Brendon’s back. Celeste watched as it walked in circles and willed

it to sting.

“May I help you?”

The tall woman standing in the doorway bore little resemblance to the woman Celeste had chatted with at holiday parties. Harriett’s hair hadn’t been touched by a stylist in months, and its natural waves were no longer ironed out. The gray had grown in, and silvery strands mingled with blond. A smear of rich black dirt stretched from her right cheekbone to the ear. She wore an army-green mechanic’s jumpsuit, its sleeves rolled up past her elbows and the zipper pulled down just enough to reveal the top of a black sports bra. Her arms looked lean and strong. One of her hands held a half-eaten apple.

“Celeste Howard,” Harriet said, her smile exposing a significant gap between her two front teeth. It was such a distinguishing feature that Celeste was amazed she hadn’t noticed it before. Together with eyes that seemed unusually focused and a mouth that stretched from ear to ear, the gap gave Harriett a feral, hungry look. “What a pleasure to see you.”

“Harriett.” Celeste hadn’t expected to be remembered, and found herself at a loss for words. “You look so different.”

“Yes,” Harriett readily agreed. “I’ve really let myself go.”

“That’s not what I meant!” Celeste rushed to clarify.

Harriett placed a hand on the younger woman’s shoulder, sending a wave of heat down Celeste’s arm. “I know what you meant,” she said.

Brendon stepped forward. Celeste noticed he seemed less sure of himself. Whatever he’d been expecting wasn’t at all what he’d found. “We’d like to have a word with you, if you don’t mind. May we come in?”

As Harriett’s attention migrated slowly to the man, the smile remained on her face. “Do I know you?” she asked, her head cocked, like a cat contemplating a roach.

Brendon offered a hand, which Harriett regarded with amusement but didn’t deign to touch. “My name is Brendon Baker.” He let his hand drop. “I’m president of the Mattauk Homeowners Association.”

“Ah,” Harriett replied, as if that were enough and she didn’t care to know any more. “So how have you been, Celeste? You certainly look well.”

Celeste blushed. It felt like it had been ages, she realized, since anyone had given her their full attention. “I am well. And you?”

“I’ve been busy.” Harriett took a bite of her apple and chewed leisurely before continuing. “Very busy, in fact. I’ve been catching up on my reading.

There are so many fascinating subjects I never had time to explore. Botany, primarily, but also—”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Osborne—” Brendon cut in.

“Ms.,” Harriett corrected him, without glancing in his direction.

“Of course. Ms. Osborne. We’re here to talk to you about the state of your property. I’m afraid we’ve had multiple complaints. I’m aware you’ve suffered some setbacks lately, but you will need to resume maintenance of your house and lawn or we will be forced to impose fines.”

Mortified, Celeste turned her gaze to the porch, where a colony of black ants was following a twisting trail up a railing. Then she heard Harriett laugh, and looked up to see that the amusement appeared genuine.

“How about that? We’ve only just met, and yet you know so much about me.” Harriett leaned lazily against the doorframe. “How do you do it, Mr. Baker? Are you psychic? Have you hacked into my accounts? Or are you just one of those men who thinks he’s an expert on women?”

Celeste had made other house calls with Brendon. She’d heard terrified owners plead with or praise him. Harriett was the first to belittle him. She must have known Brendon had the power to make her life miserable, but she wasn’t going to kneel down before him.

“I apologize if my assumptions were incorrect,” Brendon said flatly, his true feelings revealed by the flush creeping up past his shirt collar.

“Regardless of your financial situation, something must be done about the state of your lawn.”

“No.” She said it firmly, without anger or urgency.

“No?” Brendon repeated, as if he weren’t familiar with the word.

Harriett swept an arm toward the horizon. “This is the way it wants to be,” she replied.

“Less than a year ago, this property was the pride of Mattauk.” Brendon tried trading vinegar for honey. “Your gardeners were here twice a week.”

“Poisoning the earth with their weed killers and pesticides. All so my former husband could feel like he’d conquered nature. Chase was so happy when you took over the HOA, Mr. Baker. He used to phone in anonymous complaints several times a week. You two would love each other. He’s an uptight little prick as well. No doubt you’re both compensating for the same deficiency.”

For a moment, it didn’t sound like an insult. It simply seemed like a statement of fact. Then Harriett let her eyes roll down to Brendon’s crotch,



where they lingered for a moment before returning to his reddening face.

Brendon stiffened his spine and puffed out his chest as though trying to appear larger. “You have a legal obligation to maintain this property and abide by the community’s landscaping regulations.”

“You’re wrong, Mr. Baker.” Harriett studied her apple for a spot to bite. “My house predates the homeowners association. My ex-husband voluntarily signed the agreement when the property was in his name. Now the house belongs solely to me, and I never signed anything.”

“But you’re still bound by—”

Harriett sighed and shook her head as if he were wasting her time. “No,” she said. “I checked. For the first time in my life, I’m not bound by anything.”

“We’ll see,” Brendon fumed. “Our lawyers will be in touch. Come along, Celeste.”

Harriett sank her teeth into the apple and watched with amusement as Brendon stomped down the drive.

“‘Come along, Celeste?’” she repeated as she chewed. “Why would someone like you take orders from someone like that?” Harriett made it sound like one of the great mysteries of the universe.

“I honestly don’t know,” Celeste admitted. Brendon got in the car, slammed the door, and turned on the engine. “I should probably go. I rode here with him.”

“I think you’d be much happier if you stayed here with me.” Harriett reached out and slid a hand down the slope from Celeste’s shoulder to her elbow. She let it linger there for a moment, her fingers cupping the joint and her thumb pressed against the throbbing vein at the arm’s crease.

Though the offer seemed clear enough, Celeste was sure she’d misheard. “But you know my husband—”

Harriett cocked her head again and grinned. “What does any of this have to do with him?”

Celeste was stunned to find herself unable to answer. Surely, she thought, it had *something* to do with Andrew. After all, she’d married for love, and that love hadn’t died. She remained fond of her husband. She’d just grown to see romance for what it was—a sappy-sweet fantasy she’d entertained in her youth, like fairies or the Easter Bunny. Though she felt nostalgia for those early days, her marriage had become a financial arrangement. She remained devoted to keeping up her side of the deal. She would ensure that

the children were happy and healthy. Their home would continue to run efficiently. For several wonderful years, the agreement had included exclusive access to each other's bodies. But Celeste's had come to feel like her own once again.

That's why she wasn't hurt by Andrew's affair, she realized. That's why she'd never asked her husband who was he seeing after work—or who accompanied him on all his business trips. For a while, she'd wondered if she was afraid to have those questions answered. Now Celeste knew the truth—as long as Andrew upheld his end of the bargain, she just didn't care. Andrew was her business partner. What Harriett was offering was something quite different.

**“I quit the homeowners association,”** Celeste informed her husband later that night.

“Oh?” he replied, without looking up from his phone. Now that his salary was in the high six figures, her decisions were of little consequence. “Good for you, darling.”

“I spent some time with Harriett Osborne today.”

That got his attention. “With Harriett? Poor thing. How's she doing?”

“Well,” Celeste said, “I think she and I are going to hang out more often.”

“Doing what?” His lack of imagination had always amused her.

“Lady things,” Celeste replied with a smile.

“Are you sure she's not out to—” He stopped. “I mean, do you think she might be—” He was smart enough not to give voice to his hunch—that Harriett was out to get even with him for the job she'd lost. If nothing else, she had to know that befriending his wife would unsettle him. Why else would a woman like Harriett want to spend time with Celeste?

His wife chuckled lightheartedly. “No, Andrew,” she told him. “My relationship with Harriett doesn't have anything to do with you.”

## Hot and Bothered

“Holy shit.” Jo Levison cackled and let her Toyota Highlander slow to a stop. “What the fuck is going on over there?”

“Come on, Jo,” her husband groaned. “Language?”

“That’s nothing,” droned eleven-year-old Lucy from the back seat. “She says way worse when you’re not around.”

“Snitch!” Jo stuck out her tongue at the rearview mirror.

“She’s not the only one,” Art chided their daughter. “I’ve heard you two talking when you think you’re alone. It’s like listening to a couple of Hells Angels.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes *fuck* is the only word that will do,” Jo said. “You’d know just how appropriate it is in this case if you bothered to put down your fucking phone.”

Art finished what he was typing and peered over the rim of his reading glasses. When he cracked up, Jo had no choice but to join him. His booming laugh was one of the reasons she’d fallen in love with him in the first place. He could be such a prig at times, it was a relief to know he still had a sense of humor.

“What the hell is he doing?”

Brendon Baker was out on his lawn, yanking at the stem of an enormous weed that had consumed an entire flower bed. Jo had driven past his house just the previous day and nothing had seemed amiss. She certainly hadn’t noticed a giant, wicked-looking plant with toothed leaves, long white flowers, and egg-shaped seedpods covered in spikes.

“It’s like something out of *Jurassic Park*,” Lucy marveled.

They watched as Brendon tried to uproot the plant from a different angle. He bent over to grasp the stem at its base, exposing pasty white flesh and a fur-lined ass crack. Lucy and Jo both made retching noises.

“How would you describe the theme of this scene?” Art asked their daughter.

“The epic struggle of man against nature?”

Art turned to Jo and raised a pompous eyebrow. He’d been helping Lucy with her homework lately.

“I was going to say karmic justice,” Art said, “but sure—‘the epic struggle’ works too.”

The previous summer, the Levison family had been forced to pay a two-hundred-dollar fine when Art hadn’t found the energy to mow the grass one week. At the time, Jo couldn’t figure out who infuriated her most: her husband, who literally had nothing else to do, or the sadist who’d been waiting for Art to neglect one of his few remaining duties.

“Well, I say the motherfucker’s getting what he deserves.”

“Jo.” Art gestured toward the child sitting behind them. “You really want her speaking that way?”

“I wasn’t aware we were raising her to marry into the royal family,” Jo said. “Lucy, darling, which of the princes do you prefer? Gorgeous George or Luscious Louie? Though if you like Cuddly Charlotte, that’s lovely, too.”

“Which one of them is going to be king?” Lucy asked with characteristic bluntness.

“George,” Jo informed her.

“Then I’d choose George, throw him in jail on our wedding night, and take over the United Kingdom.”

Jo swiveled around to give her daughter a high-five.

“You’re setting a bad example.” Art was serious. He never knew when to let it go.

“How exactly am I setting a bad example?” Jo felt her palms grow damp against the steering wheel. The bubbling pocket of heat beneath her sternum began to spread through her body. “I’m raising my daughter to be strong and speak her mind.”

“You’re raising *our* daughter to get kicked out of sixth grade.”

Jo wheeled around toward him, ready to retaliate.

“Fuck the sixth grade,” said Lucy. “Didn’t we just decide that I’m gonna be queen?”