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# THANK YOU for LISTENING

A Novel

"Pure magic."  
—JODI PICOULT

JULIA WHELAN

A stylized illustration featuring a yellow book cover with the title 'THANK YOU for LISTENING' and author 'JULIA WHELAN'. The book is set against a pink background. To the right is a white coffee cup with a lemon slice. In the foreground is a blue rotary phone. The overall style is graphic and vibrant.

**THANK  
YOU**  
*A Novel* *for*  
**LISTENING**



**JULIA WHELAN**



**AVON**

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# Dedication

*To those we have loved.  
Particularly partners.  
Particularly mine.*

# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Dedication*

## Part 1

Chapter One: “A Woman Goes on a Journey”

Chapter Two: “The Best Friend”

Chapter Three: “The Stakes”

Chapter Four: “The Makeover”

Chapter Five: “The Notorious Rake”

Chapter Six: “What Happens in Vegas”

## Part 2

Chapter Seven: “The Offer”

Chapter Eight: “The Decision”

## Part 3

Chapter Nine: “Epistolary”

## Part 4

Chapter Ten: “Snowed In”

Chapter Eleven: “The Reveal”

Chapter Twelve: “The Reckoning”

Chapter Thirteen: “The Break”

## Part 5

Chapter Fourteen: “The Retreat”

Chapter Fifteen: “Getting to Know You”

Chapter Sixteen: “The Consummation”

Chapter Seventeen: “The Proposal”

Chapter Eighteen: “The Resolve”  
Chapter Nineteen: “The Reconciliation”

Coda

Epilogue: “A Stranger Comes to Town”

*Acknowledgments*

*P.S. Insights, Interviews & More . . .\**

*About the Author*

*About the Book*

*Praise for Thank You for Listening*

*Also by Julia Whelan*

*Copyright*

*About the Publisher*

# Part 1

*All of literature is one of two stories: a man goes on a journey or a stranger comes to town.*

–Leo Tolstoy

*Prologues are like flirting: there's a time and place. But sometimes you just need to push the reader up against the wall and stick your tongue down their throat.*

–June French, *USA Today* bestselling author of the Love Comes Hard series, as told to *Cosmopolitan*

## Chapter One

### *“A Woman Goes on a Journey”*

THINGS WERE HEATING UP WITH NO POSSIBILITY OF COOLING DOWN. Not this time. She could see it in his eyes. His pupils were throbbing. The gentleman of the last three weeks was gone. He was now anything but gentle. He was all man.

Their eyes were locked and loaded. He raised his hand and flattened it against her white silk blouse. Her heartbeat grabbed at it. He kissed her, hotly, wetly, then took hold of her straddled hips and lifted her off him. She gave a startled cry as he flipped her—

“Something to drink?”

—onto her back on his expensive crepe de Chine couch.

“Ma’am?”

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” he growled. “You’re my intern. And Grandfather insists I marry Caroline.”

“Something to drink?”

The long-suffering tone broke through and Sewanee Chester, startled window seat occupant, whipped off her noise-canceling headphones as if they were on fire. “What? Sorry! What?”

“Something to drink?”

“Uh. Just water. Please.”

“Ice?”

“Uh, just—please.”

She dropped her tray and the flight attendant passed her the water. Before Sewanee could thank her, the woman on the aisle turned to her daughter in the middle seat and asked, in the squeaky, love-dripping voice used interchangeably for pets and children, “Anything to driiiiink?”

“Juice!”



“What kiiiiind of juice?”

Sewanee slipped her headphones back on and realized she hadn't stopped the audiobook. The blouse was off now. She sighed, paused it, connected to the in-flight Wi-Fi, and texted Mark:

Good morning. I hate you.

She hit send and sipped her water.  
Twenty seconds later, he replied:

I gave you one of the well-reviewed ones!

**SEWANEE:**

His pupils are throbbing, Mark. His PUPILS.

While Mark typed (bubbles, bubbles, bubbles . . . he was pushing seventy, she cut him some slack), Sewanee drank.

**MARK:**

Don't be a snob. Not all of us have English prof fathers honey.

**SEWANEE:**

this has nothing to do with snobbery. OR my father. This has to do with ANATOMY.

Mark ignored this:

Really appreciate you filling in.

**SEWANEE:**

Anything for you. How's the foot?

**MARK:**

Still broken. How's you?

**SEWANEE:**

I want to change the name of the panel.

**MARK:**

What's wrong with Faking it: Narrating Love and Sex in Romance Novels?

**SEWANEE:**

I was thinking . . . Narrating Romance Novels: How to Give Good Aural.

She finished the water, tipping her head all the way back. The ice cubes mounted their escape, ramming her teeth so forcefully water shot down her neck and onto her shirt.

“You spilled!”

Sewanee smiled tightly at the child while setting her cup down in the

circular playpen at the corner of the tray. Had that little lip ever prevented cups from overturning during turbulence? She wanted the numbers on that.

**MARK:**

I know how you feel about Romance but you'll get threw this. Just please take it seriously.

**SEWANEE:**

\*Through.

Over the PA, a male flight attendant announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, I know we just finished service, but in a few minutes, we'll be starting our descent into Las Vegas. At this time, we'll need you to put away all electronic devices—"

Sewanee looked down at her phone. Mark had finished typing.

**MARK:**

The fans are insane. You should see the facebook groups. You don't no.

**SEWANEE:**

\*know. We talked about this. I get it.

**MARK:**

ducking autocorrect! This is BiblioCon! 50K attendees and the Romance pavilion is at least a third of them.

"Ma'am, I need you to put up your tray."

Sewanee did.

"I also need you to put your seat up."

"It won't go up." Sewanee kept typing into her phone.

The flight attendant reached across the mother and child to yank Sewanee's seat forward. The little girl turned to help her for a moment, then threw her sticky hands up in defeat. "It won't go up!"

"Thank you," Sewanee muttered.

"Welcome," she replied.

**SEWANEE:**

Mark, I said I get it. Big! Yuge! You get a book and you get a book and you get a book!

**MARK:**

And don't forget to enjoy yourself, Oprah. Vegas, Baby! LOL.

Sewanee pulled up her e-mail and rechecked the overwhelming number of BiblioCon events. She narrowed it down to Romance programming and shuffled through author talks, signings, cocktail hours,

and a silent auction for charity. She laughed out loud at one highlighted item: dinner with a male cover model. She then perused the plethora of panels on offer: *Crossed Swords: Writing M/M Romance When You Don't Have a Sword of Your Own*; *How to Write Period Clothing and How to Take It Off*; and, of course, her own panel on audiobook production that Mark—her mentor, boss, and landlord—would have been moderating himself if he hadn't run over his foot with his own car two days ago. That red Karmann Ghia, Sal, was the closest thing Mark had had to a long-term relationship since he'd fled San Francisco in it fifteen years ago. After his partner, Julio, died.

She'd been happy to help him out with BiblioCon, but there were two problems. Maybe three. While she was essentially Mark's Girl Friday, helping him run the recording studio he operated out of his home in the Hollywood Hills in exchange for living in its hillside guesthouse, she wasn't an audiobook producer like Mark; she was a narrator. The second problem was she was a narrator who didn't narrate Romance. She'd done it in the beginning when she was cutting her teeth, recorded it under a pseudonym as many narrators did, but once her career took off, she'd retired her alias, quit Romance, and never looked back. Lastly, she wasn't even a fan of the genre.

She didn't belong in the Romance pavilion.

She double-checked the info Mark had forwarded her. She had nothing until tomorrow. The panel in the morning, then booth duty on the general convention floor for the rest of the day, answering authors' questions about audiobook production. A quick flight back on Sunday afternoon. An easy forty-eight hours of her life. Plus, she got to be in Vegas at the same time as her best friend, who had also been roped into attending the conference. But for very different reasons.

"Are you a pirate?"

Sewanee startled, turned to the little girl, and found her staring.

The mother startled, too. "Hannah!"

"She looks like a pirate."

The mother took her child into a hug, conveniently muzzling her. "You'll have to forgive her. She's four."

"I'm almost gonna be five!" Hannah sounded like she was arguing into a pillow.

"It's okay." Sewanee gave her an indulgent smile. "No, I'm not a pirate."

Hannah wriggled out of her mother's chokehold and turned fully to Sewanee. "But you have a patch on your eye."

“Hannah.” Sharper this time. By Los Angeles parenting standards, it might have been considered stern. She pivoted toward her daughter, scooting to the edge of her seat, loosening her seat belt, getting *directly in front of her child and on her level*, as she’d probably been coached to do. A teaching moment was upon them. “We don’t ask strangers personal questions, sweetness. You’re so, so, so smart, and I cherish your curiosity, but we respect people’s privacy, mmkay?” The high-pitched pet voice was back.

Hannah turned toward Sewanee again. “But why do you have it?”

Her mother turned her back around. “Now, see, Banana Bread, that’s a personal question, isn’t it?”

“Don’t call me Banana Bread, I told you. I hate it.”

“I’m sorry.”

Hannah wriggled back to Sewanee. “Are you hurt?”

One more Hail Mary, “Hannah!” But Sewanee was used to this line of questioning. She supposed it was refreshing that, at the moment, it wasn’t coming from a drunk guy in a bar.

“Nope. Not anymore.”

“But, but, if you’re not hurt, why is it got—”

That said, Sewanee’s patience extended only so far. “I’d love to keep talking to you,” she said, tapping the Bluetooth headphones around her neck, “but I need to finish my work.” She glanced at the mother for parental assistance.

“Oh, of course! Four is just such a curious age—”

“Five!”

Sewanee shook her head. “It’s totally fine. I’m just on deadline and if I don’t finish listening to this, I could end up looking for a new job.”

Blame the improv background, the acting training, a childhood living in stories, but Sewanee could lie. Easily. To herself as much as anyone else. She lifted the headphones off her neck and secured them over her ears. She pressed play on her phone. No sound. She turned up the volume. Still nothing. She turned it all the way up.

In her peripheral vision, she saw the mother clasp her hands over Hannah’s ears, pull her into her narrow chest, and bug her eyes at Sewanee.

No.

God, no.

She ripped the headphones off in time to hear, at full volume:

“He thrust her legs apart, splaying her open, exposing her secret place to his throbbing eyes. Already pulsing, glistening, her generous—”

Sewanee stabbed so fiercely at the pause button the phone shot to the floor. She scrambled for it, the audiobook continuing:

“‘Say it,’ he growled. ‘I want to hear you say it.’ He gave her one quick, teasing lick. She moaned. ‘Say you want my—’”

The phone had fallen under Hannah’s dangling, light-up Disney-princess sneakers. Sewanee grabbed it, jerked upright, and—in three stabs—stopped the audiobook . . . just after the word “cock.”

She stared down at the phone, ignoring the glare drilling into her temple. She took, what she hoped, was a casual-seeming breath. Then, as if nothing had happened (denial was another skill she’d honed), she turned fully away from mother and child and looked out the window.

Once she’d focused, actually took in the view their descent offered, she concluded Las Vegas had a rather flaccid look during the day. All that nighttime neon was like Vegas Viagra.

She shifted in her seat. Who takes a kid to Las Vegas, anyway? she thought righteously, if irrationally. Great parenting. She knew mothers like that. Hell, she had a mother like that. Soft, over-loving. She’d been raised the way Hannah was being raised. West side of L.A. (you could tell by the mother’s ropey yoga arms, her rootless dye job, her thoroughly moisturized skin), schools with *feelings*, parents who wanted the best for their child while ensuring their child was the best. Who said you could be anything, do anything, dreams do come true, you’re special, you’re anointed. Just be *nice* to everyone, *respect* everyone, tell the truth, work hard, and everything will fall into place. You will live happily ever after.

*Well, good luck with that, Hannah.*

Because this is how it actually goes.

A stunningly average woman the wrong side of thirty on her way to Vegas, wearing an eye patch, sitting in a broken seat, listening to porn.

## Chapter Two

### *“The Best Friend”*

SEWANEE ASSESSED HERSELF IN THE GILDED MIRROR OF THE VENETIAN’S elevator. Unwashed hair, saggy jeans, rumpled T-shirt, zip-up hoodie with some unidentifiable breakfast-y stain near the zipper. No wonder the woman who gave her the key at the VIP lounge had looked confused.

When the elevator doors opened on the thirty-fifth floor, she followed signs to the right. Stopping at the correct door, she slipped her backpack off (carefully—her right shoulder still screamed sometimes) and set it on top of her roller bag. She opened the door with the key card.

A marble hallway beckoned her. She glided down it, passing a powder room larger than her guesthouse bathroom. On the opposite side, a butler’s pantry/bar that could have serviced the entire hotel. Eventually she was standing in the middle of a sunken ultra-modern marble living room with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Strip.

“You made it!”

She pivoted left, looked down another long hallway, and saw the bathrobed and barefoot two-time Golden Globe–nominated, one-time Oscar-nominated (they didn’t talk about *that* discrepancy), L’Oréal spokesmodel, and UNICEF ambassador, Adaku Obi sprinting toward her.

Before Sewanee could respond, Adaku was upon her, wrapping her in a fierce, all-encompassing hug. Adaku’s hugs always began with swaying, moved into meditative stillness, and ended with deep yoga breathing. The girl knew how to stay in the moment. Even if it was only for a moment.

Adaku pulled back and smiled big. “Isn’t this insane?! It’s ginormous! Stupid!” Adaku had always spoken in exclamatory bursts, but the tempo had increased, Sewanee had noticed, in direct proportion to her success. “And guess what?! You’ll never guess so I’ll tell you. There’re two bedrooms!” She gave Sewanee a teasing push.

Sewanee pushed her back. “Only two?”

Adaku guffawed and pushed her again. “That I’ve found so far! Now you have to stay with me!”

Sewanee scanned the sprawl. Shook her head. “Mark already paid for my suite at the Rio.”

Adaku gave her a look. “Aren’t all the rooms at the Rio ‘suites’?” She finger-quoted the last word.

Sewanee reached for her hand, smiling. “I can’t leave Mark with a bill for a hotel I didn’t use.”

“How much is it?”

Sewanee squeezed Adaku’s hand, shook it for good measure. “No, no, no. You know I hate that.” Off Adaku’s pursed lips, she added, “Don’t do the face.”

“What face?”

“You know exactly what face.”

“I don’t know what—”

“A!” Sewanee dropped Adaku’s hand and walked to the window. Dammit. It was a spectacular view.

Adaku was starring in a film based on last year’s number one *New York Times*’s bestselling book. She was doing a main-stage interview with the author, a VIP meet-and-greet, an autograph hour, and some international press junket thing. No sideshow Romance pavilion for her. At BiblioCon, she herself was the main event.

In the window’s reflection, Sewanee watched Adaku come up behind her and spread her arms out, a queen addressing her people far below. “We’re living the dream, Swan! I’ve got bottle service at the club, a limo on standby, a freaking butler at my twenty-four-hour beck and call!”

Sewanee paused. Adaku, born and bred in the white Chicago suburbs, third daughter of two lovely but demanding Nigerian doctors, was finally allowing herself to enjoy her hard-won accomplishments. It had been a long time coming. People thought success happened faster than it did. A best-supporting-actress nomination did not come with a swag bag of private jets, penthouses, and Porsches. Adaku had *just* bought her first house, a two-bedroom bungalow in Echo Park, thanks to the L’Oréal money. This was the first time the red carpet had been rolled out to this extent. Adaku Obi was starring in a film and the studio wanted to make her happy.

So it was earned. And, yes, it was fun. But Sewanee wanted to urge caution. To slow her down a bit. Tell her that life was subject to change without notice. But she squashed the impulse and used a move out of

Adaku's own playbook: when she couldn't say what she wanted to, she changed the subject. "I'm sorry, why aren't we drinking champagne right now?"

Adaku barked her signature laugh and squeezed Sewanee's shoulders. "Because it's chillin' in the fancy Sub-Zero fridge!" As she scampered off, she yelled over her shoulder, "They gave me Cristal!"

Sewanee turned back to the window and gave herself a good, firm, mental shake. She was happy, genuinely, for her friend. This had nothing to do with Adaku. Adaku wasn't the problem.

She heard the *pop* of the cork, the glug of the pour, and the posh little patter of Adaku's bare ballerina feet on the marble behind her.

She turned away from the window and Adaku handed her the glass of bubbly, looking Sewanee directly in the eye. "To our dream coming true."

Sewanee toasted her and took a large swig of the best champagne she'd ever had.

"Okay! What do we want to do? I have that dinner I told you about but I'm free until then. Let's get this party started!" Sewanee knew, because she knew everything about her best friend, that while anyone who found themselves in Adaku's whirling dervish of a presence would swear otherwise, she had never done cocaine.

"Whatever you want! I can't check in until three o'clock so . . ."

Adaku rolled her eyes and Sewanee could see another argument for ditching the Rio forming, so she quickly said, "I have to do some work tonight, so let's have fun but not too much. Tomorrow night, I'm all in. Speaking of, I brought five hundred dollars and I'm putting it on red or black. Haven't decided which yet. Who knows, maybe I'll get lucky."

"Oh, you're getting lucky if I have anything to say about it! It's been way too long." Adaku held up her glass again. Sewanee clinked it, chuckling, and they both said, simultaneously, effortlessly, freely, "I love you." They sipped and the bubbles felt like Pop Rocks on Swan's tongue and, suddenly, she was content. That's what A did for her.

Adaku set her glass down on a side table Sewanee thought might have been a sculpture and clapped her hands together. "So! I have to do a phone interview in ten minutes, shouldn't be more than half an hour—at least my publicist promised it wouldn't be—and then we hit it!" She refilled Sewanee's glass while saying, "You take this, go luxuriate in the spa"—she pointed down yet another long hallway—"fix yourself"—she looked Swan up and down—"and get ready to *partaaay!*" She twirled out of the room on the last word like Stevie Nicks, champagne sloshing out of her glass and splatting on the marble.



Sewanee smiled and walked down the other cavernous hallway, stopping in her tracks at the door to the bathroom.

Oh, okay. It was an actual spa. There was a steam room, a sauna, and a massage table all surrounding a Japanese soaking tub. She wasn't sure where to go first. The tub called to her, so she stripped down—eye patch and all—and slipped into the perfectly regulated 104-degree water.

As she adapted to it, her mind wandered back to the studio apartment in Washington Heights. The one she had shared with Adaku when they were in school. The one where they had huddled together under blankets when the furnace had gone out and played the “when we're famous” game. Julliard had been sucking them dry, financially and emotionally, but they'd had a bottomless well of optimism that could only come from youth and inexperience. When we're famous, we'll eat sushi every night. When we're famous, people will stop us on the street and say how much they love our work. When we're famous, we'll have reliable heating. When we're famous.

Not you. Not me. We.

Sewanee hadn't known then how quickly a dream could become a thing that mocked you.

TURNED OUT, VEGAS by day was not as flaccid as Sewanee had thought. She and Adaku had already window-shopped and people-watched, and they were now tucked into two club chairs in a beautiful bar somewhere in the Venetian's Grand Canal Shoppes, sipping something expensive. Free, but expensive. Once Adaku had signed a cocktail napkin “To Roy, Always Adaku,” their eager server had upgraded their vodka sodas to something sweet dusted with gold flake. “Do we need to worry about heavy metal poisoning?” Sewanee joked once he'd left. Adaku had sniffed the surface of the drink, said, “But, what a way to go,” and took a sip. Sewanee followed suit.

“So, how's BlahBlah doing?” Adaku asked.

“Oh, you know,” Sewanee sighed. “Physically, she's okay. Mentally? You ever seen *Memento*?”

Adaku grimaced. “Is she . . . does she still remember who you are?”

“Oh, yeah. I started bringing her my audiobooks and I think hearing my voice when I'm not there helps her remember me when I am.”

“Amazing. And how about your dad?”

“She remembers him, too. Unfortunately.”

Adaku chuckled. “I meant how *is* the old bathrobe?”

Sewanee guffawed, they set their empty glasses down, and Roy

appeared, as if he'd been waiting in the wings for just such a cue. "You guys doing okay? Or do we need some more gold for that?"

"My bartending magician!" Adaku flirted. "Abracadabra, please!" She held up both empty glasses.

"Your wish is my command." Roy relieved her of the glasses. "Back in a flash." He made a *whooshing* sound as he left, presumably vanishing.

"Is there anything you can't get a man to do?" Sewanee marveled.

"Commit?" As Sewanee laughed, Adaku turned her attention to the room, scanning it, radar looking for a blip. "Speaking of men, see anyone cute?"

Sewanee didn't look. "No."

"Come on! We're in Vegas!" Adaku leaned in, grinning devilishly. "What happens in Vegas, stays in—"

"Only if you use protection." Adaku chuckled, but Sewanee made a sound like a hissing cat. "I think I have a gold flake caught in my throat."

At that moment, Roy reappeared, making the same *whooshing* sound, and Sewanee stifled her hacking.

"He appears!" Adaku exclaimed. "Roy the Remarkable!"

"What else can I conjure for you ladies?" he asked, through his Vegas grin.

Adaku caught Sewanee's eye. A silent conversation ensued. *How about him?* Adaku asked. Sewanee imperceptibly tipped her chin down. *No.*

Adaku ignored her, turning to Roy. "By the way, this is my best friend, Sewanee."

"Shauney?"

"No, SWAH-nee. Like swan the bird and knee the joint."

Sewanee cringed. "Call me Swan. Like the bird. Forget the joint thing."

"This is the cool name table, huh?" He offered a little windshield wiper wave. "So, Swaaaaan, you somebody, too?"

"Uh, yes." She cleared her throat one more time. "Aren't we all?"

"Ha!" He finger-gunned her, making yet another sound. "*Pew pew.* I meant, you famous, too?"

Adaku leaned in. "She's the greatest living audiobook narrator on the planet!"

Sewanee held up a hand. "That's not—"

"Audiobooks?" Roy's eyebrows shot up. "Dude, that's my jam! You done anything I would have listened to?"

She sipped her cocktail and discovered the secret to dislodging gold

flake was, apparently, more gold flake.

Meanwhile, Adaku said, “You’ve heard her, trust me. She does, like, every big book! She’s won every award that can be won! Have you listened to *Them Hills*?” Sewanee had to give Adaku credit for sizing this guy up. If there were any book she’d narrated that he’d probably listened to, it was going to be last year’s hyper-masculinized best-selling Western. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* told from the woman’s perspective.

He lit up like a slot machine. “Dude! Dude! That book rocked! That was you?”

She presented herself awkwardly with her hands.

Roy peered at Sewanee, seeing her anew. “You crushed it! Wait, so did you meet the guy who played Butch and Sundance? Do you, like, record together?”

Adaku and Sewanee looked at each other then back at Roy. Adaku said, “What guy?”

“The guy! The guy who voiced the guys.”

Adaku and Sewanee looked at each other again. Adaku said, “That wasn’t a guy.”

“No, the Butch-and-Sundance-guy guy.”

“Ohhhh, that guy. Yeah, he wasn’t a guy.” Adaku was enjoying this a bit too much.

“Who wasn’t a guy?”

“The guy reading.”

“Wasn’t a guy?”

“Nope.”

Sewanee intervened before Adaku short-circuited Roy. “What she’s trying to say is, it was me.”

Roy took a moment with this. An extended moment. He narrowed his eyes. “Oh, I see.” He turned to Adaku. “You think I think she did the whole book, *including* the guys!” Roy guffawed. “No way I would have thought that! But I can understand how you would think I thought that.”

Adaku’s head jerked around on her neck like a malfunctioning robot. “Well. Glad we cleared that up!”

Roy turned back to Swan. “So, who was the guy?”

Sewanee considered making up a name and moving on. Adaku was no help at this point, having submerged her laughing face in her drink. She’d give it one more go. “Roy?” Her tone was kindergarten teacher. “The guy? The guys? Were me.”

Roy threw his head back. “Not you, too! The guy—”

“Roy?” Same tone. He looked at her again. “When I recorded *Them*

*Hills*, the . . . book people? Had me do all the voices. Butch and Sundance included.”

Silence. “All the voices?”

“All the voices,” Sewanee repeated.

Roy stilled. Then tilted his head. He looked like a Labrador waiting for a command.

She dropped her voice to a place that was second nature at this point. “Someday, Butch, you’re gonna die and then you’ll realize you never really lived.”

Roy stared at her.

Sewanee took a sip of her drink, waiting.

Finally: “Dude.”

Adaku banged the table. “Amazing, right?!”

The sound snapped Roy out of his confusion. Now he was awestruck. “How do you do that?”

Sewanee waved him in and spoke quietly, mysteriously. “Keep it to yourself. Know what I mean?”

He looked as though he had been allowed to peek behind a curtain. He slowly bobbed his head. “Riiiiight. Totally.” He winked knowingly and headed back to his post at the bar.

Adaku took a moment. Then shrugged. “Okay, so not him!”

“HIT ME!”

They’d landed at a blackjack table. Adaku was playing, Sewanee was watching.

The dealer turned over the next card. “Twenty-one.”

“Bam!” Adaku pulled Sewanee down into the seat next to her. “Come on! Play!” She pushed a stack of \$25 chips in front of her and said to the dealer, “She’s playing.”

“Not with your money.”

“Shhhh. Ten minutes! Ten little minutes! I’m on a roll. Then we’ll go find your roulette wheel.”

“I have prep work to—”

“The books aren’t going anywhere, Swan.”

The dealer said, “Card change, ladies. It’ll be a couple minutes.”

Relieved, Sewanee sat back.

And sensed two guys skulk up behind them.

“’Scuse me?” The taller one tapped Adaku on her shoulder.

Sewanee watched her pull away from the touch even as she turned to them with her stock yes-it’s-me smile. “Hi!”