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A NOVEL

#1

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BESTSELLER

JEANINE CUMMINS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Author pic © Joe Kennedy

Jeanine Cummins is the author of three books: the novels *The Outside Boy* and *The Crooked Branch* and one true crime work, *A Rip in Heaven*. She lives in New York with her husband and two children.

PRAISE

‘A perfect balancing act with terror on one side and love on the other . . . It’s marvellous’ Stephen King

‘From the opening page your heart will be in your mouth . . . it will change your view of the world’ Kirsty Wark

‘Made me understand better why someone would give up the home they know and love to survive’ Tracy Chevalier

‘Electric, important, heartbreaking and joyous’ Kate Hamer

‘A roaring human triumph’ Laline Paull

‘A dazzling accomplishment’ Julia Alvarez

‘Leaps the borders of the page and demands attention’ Sarah Blake

‘Relevant, powerful, extraordinary’ Kristin Hannah

‘Harrowing and necessary. As pacy as a thriller but full of deep compassion’ Julie Cohen

‘Not simply the great American novel, it’s the great novel of *Las Américas*’ Sandra Cisneros

Also by Jeanine Cummins

Fiction

The Outside Boy

The Crooked Branch

Memoir

A Rip in Heaven

ABOUT THE BOOK

She feels every molecule of her loss and she endures it. She is not diluted, but amplified. Her love for Luca is bigger, louder. Lydia is vivid with life.

Yesterday, Lydia had a bookshop.

Yesterday, Lydia was married to a journalist.

Yesterday, she was with everyone she loved most in the world.

Today, her eight-year-old son Luca is all she has left.

For him, she will carry a machete strapped to her leg.

For him, she will leap onto the roof of a high-speed train.

For him, she will find the strength to keep running.

For Joe

Era la sed y el hambre, y tú fuiste la fruta.

Era el duelo y las ruinas, y tú fuiste el milagro.

There were thirst and hunger, and you were the fruit.

There were grief and ruins, and you were the miracle.

—Pablo Neruda, from ‘The Song of Despair’

CHAPTER ONE

One of the very first bullets comes in through the open window above the toilet where Luca is standing. He doesn't immediately understand that it's a bullet at all, and it's only luck that it doesn't strike him between the eyes. Luca hardly registers the mild noise it makes as it flies past and lodges into the tiled wall behind him. But the wash of bullets that follows is loud, booming, and thudding, *clack-clacking* with helicopter speed. There is a raft of screams, too, but that noise is short-lived, soon exterminated by the gunfire. Before Luca can zip his pants, lower the lid, climb up to look out, before he has time to verify the source of that terrible clamor, the bathroom door swings open and Mami is there.

'*Mijo, ven,*' she says, so quietly that Luca doesn't hear her.

Her hands are not gentle; she propels him toward the shower. He trips on the raised tile step and falls forward onto his hands. Mami lands on top of him and his teeth pierce his lip in the tumble. He tastes blood. One dark droplet makes a tiny circle of red against the bright green shower tile. Mami shoves Luca into the corner. There's no door on this shower, no curtain. It's only a corner of his *abuela's* bathroom, with a third tiled wall built to suggest a stall. This wall is around five and a half feet high and three feet long – just large enough, with some luck, to shield Luca and his mother from sight. Luca's back is wedged, his small shoulders touching both walls. His knees are drawn up to his chin, and Mami is clinched around him like a tortoise's shell. The door of the bathroom remains open, which worries Luca, though he can't see it beyond the shield of his mother's body, behind the half barricade of his *abuela's* shower wall. He'd like to wriggle out and tip that door lightly with his finger. He'd like to swing it shut. He doesn't know that his mother left it open on purpose.

That a closed door only invites closer scrutiny.

The clatter of gunfire outside continues, joined by an odor of charcoal and burning meat. Papi is grilling carne asada out there and Luca's favorite chicken drumsticks. He likes them only a tiny bit blackened, the crispy tang of the skins. His mother pulls her head up long enough to look him in the eye. She puts her hands on both sides of his face and tries to cover his ears. Outside, the gunfire slows. It ceases and then returns in short bursts, mirroring, Luca thinks, the sporadic and wild rhythm of his heart. In between the racket, Luca can still hear the radio, a woman's voice announcing *¡La Mejor 100.1 FM Acapulco!* followed by Banda MS singing about how happy they are to be in love. Someone shoots the radio, and then there's laughter. Men's voices. Two or three, Luca can't tell. Hard bootsteps on Abuela's patio.

'Is he here?' One of the voices is just outside the window.

'Here.'

'What about the kid?'

'*Mira*, there's a boy here. This him?'

Luca's cousin Adrián. He's wearing cleats and his Hernández jersey. Adrián can juggle a *balón de fútbol* on his knees forty-seven times without dropping it.

'I don't know. Looks the right age. Take a picture.'

'Hey, chicken!' another voice says. 'Man, this looks good. You want some chicken?'

Luca's head is beneath his *mami's* chin, her body knotted tightly around him.

'Forget the chicken, *pendejo*. Check the house.'

Luca's *mami* rocks in her squatting position, pushing Luca even harder into the tiled wall. She squeezes against him, and together they hear the squeak and bang of the back door. Footsteps in the kitchen. The intermittent rattle of bullets in the house. Mami turns her head and notices, vivid against the tile floor, the lone spot of Luca's blood, illuminated by the slant of light from the window. Luca feels her breath snag in her chest. The house is quiet now. The hallway that ends at the door of this bathroom is carpeted. Mami tugs her shirtsleeve over her hand, and Luca watches in horror as she leans away from him, toward that telltale splatter of blood. She runs her sleeve over it, leaving behind only a faint smear, and then pitches back to him just as the man in the hallway uses the butt of his AK-47 to nudge the door the rest of the way open.

There must be three of them because Luca can still hear two voices in the yard. On the other side of the shower wall, the third man unzips his pants and empties his bladder into Abuela's toilet. Luca does not breathe. Mami does not breathe. Their eyes are closed, their bodies motionless, even their adrenaline is suspended within the calcified will of their stillness. The man hiccups, flushes, washes his hands. He dries them on Abuela's good yellow towel, the one she puts out only for parties.

They don't move after the man leaves. Even after they hear the squeak and bang, once more, of the kitchen door. They stay there, fixed in their tight knot of arms and legs and knees and chins and clenched eyelids and locked fingers, even after they hear the man join his compatriots outside, after they hear him announce that the house is clear and he's going to eat some chicken now, because there's no excuse for letting good barbecue go to waste, not when there are children starving in Africa. The man is still close enough outside the window that Luca can hear the moist, rubbery smacking sounds his mouth makes with the chicken. Luca concentrates on breathing, in and out, without sound. He tells himself that this is just a bad dream, a terrible dream, but one he's had many times before. He always awakens, heart pounding, and finds himself flooded with relief. *It was just a dream.* Because these are the modern bogeymen of urban Mexico. Because even parents who take care not to discuss the violence in front of them, to change the radio station when there's news of another shooting, to conceal the worst of their own fears, cannot prevent their children from talking to other children. On the swings, at the *fútbol* field, in the boys' bathroom at school, the gruesome stories gather and swell. These kids, rich, poor, middle-class, have all seen bodies in the streets. Casual murder. And they know from talking to one another that there's a hierarchy of danger, that some families are at greater risk than others. So although Luca never saw the least scrap of evidence of that risk from his parents, even though they demonstrated their courage impeccably before their son, he knew – he knew this day would come. But that truth does nothing to soften its arrival. It's a long, long while before Luca's mother removes the clamp of her hand from the back of his neck, before she leans back far enough for him to notice that the angle of light falling through the bathroom window has changed.

There's a blessing in the moments after terror and before confirmation. When at last he moves his body, Luca experiences a brief, lurching exhilaration at the very fact of his being alive. For a moment he enjoys the

ragged passage of breath through his chest. He places his palms flat to feel the cool press of tiles beneath his skin. Mami collapses against the wall across from him and works her jaw in a way that reveals the dimple in her left cheek. It's weird to see her good church shoes in the shower. Luca touches the cut on his lip. The blood has dried there, but he scratches it with his teeth, and it opens again. He understands that, were this a dream, he would not taste blood.

At length, Mami stands. 'Stay here,' she instructs him in a whisper. 'Don't move until I come back for you. Don't make a sound, you understand?'

Luca lunges for her hand. 'Mami, don't go.'

'*Mijo*, I will be right back, okay? You stay here.' Mami pries Luca's fingers from her hand. 'Don't move,' she says again. 'Good boy.'

Luca finds it easy to obey his mother's directive, not so much because he's an obedient child, but because he doesn't want to see. His whole family out there, in Abuela's backyard. Today is Saturday, April 7, his cousin Yénifer's *quinceañera*, her fifteenth birthday party. She's wearing a long white dress. Her father and mother are there, Tío Alex and Tía Yemi, and Yénifer's younger brother, Adrián, who, because he already turned nine, likes to say he's a year older than Luca, even though they're really only four months apart.

Before Luca had to pee, he and Adrián had been kicking the *balón* around with their other *primos*. The mothers had been sitting around the table at the patio, their iced *palomas* sweating on their napkins. The last time they were all together at Abuela's house, Yénifer had accidentally walked in on Luca in the bathroom, and Luca was so mortified that today he made Mami come with him and stand guard outside the door. Abuela didn't like it; she told Mami she was coddling him, that a boy his age should be able to go to the bathroom by himself, but Luca is an only child, so he gets away with things other kids don't.

In any case, Luca is alone in the bathroom now, and he tries not to think it, but the thought swarms up unbidden: those irritable words Mami and Abuela exchanged were perhaps the very last ones between them, ever. Luca had approached the table wriggling, whispered into Mami's ear, and Abuela, seeing this, had shaken her head, wagged an admonishing finger at them both, passed her remarks. She had a way of smiling when she criticized. But Mami was always on Luca's side. She rolled her eyes and pushed her chair back from the table anyway, ignoring her mother's

disapproval. When was that – ten minutes ago? Two hours? Luca feels unmoored from the boundaries of time that have always existed.

Outside the window he hears Mami's tentative footsteps, the soft scuff of her shoe through the remnants of something broken. A solitary gasp, too windy to be called a sob. Then a quickening of sound as she crosses the patio with purpose, depresses the keys on her phone. When she speaks, her voice has a stretched quality that Luca has never heard before, high and tight in the back of her throat.

'Send help.'

CHAPTER TWO

By the time Mami returns to pull Luca from the shower, he's curled into a tight ball and rocking himself. She tells him to stand, but he shakes his head and rolls himself up even tighter, his body flapping with panicked reluctance. As long as he stays here in this shower with his face lowered into the dark angles of his elbows, as long as he doesn't look Mami in the face, he can put off knowing what he already knows. He can prolong the moment of irrational hope that maybe some sliver of yesterday's world is still intact.

It might be better for him to go and look, to see the brilliant splatters of color on Yénifer's white dress, to see Adrián's eyes, open to the sky, to see Abuela's gray hair, matted with stuff that should never exist outside the neat encasement of a skull. It might be good, actually, for Luca to see the warm wreckage of his recent father, the spatula bent crooked beneath his fallen weight, his blood still leaching across the concrete patio. Because none of it, however horrific, is worse than the images Luca will conjure instead with the radiance of his own imagination.

When at last she gets him to stand, Mami takes Luca out the front door, which may or may not be the best idea. If *los sicarios* were to return, what would be worse – to be on the street in plain sight, or to be hidden inside where no one might witness their arrival? An impossible question. Nothing is better or worse than anything else now. They walk across Abuela's tidy courtyard and Mami opens the gate. Together they sit on the yellow-painted curb with their feet on the street. The far side is in shade, but it's bright here, and the sun is hot against Luca's forehead. After some brief swell of minutes, they hear sirens approaching. Mami, whose name is Lydia, becomes aware that her teeth are chattering. She's not cold. Her

armpits are damp, and she has goose bumps across the flesh of her arms. Luca leans forward and retches once. He brings up a glob of potato salad, stained pink with fruit punch. It splats onto the asphalt between his feet, but he and his mother don't move away from it. They don't even seem to notice. Nor do they note the furtive rearrangement of curtains and blinds in nearby windows as the neighbors prepare their credible deniability.

What Luca does notice is the walls that line his *abuela's* street. He's seen them countless times before, but today he perceives a difference: each house here is fronted by a small courtyard like Abuela's, hidden from the street by a wall like Abuela's, topped with razor wire or chicken wire or spiked fence posts like Abuela's, and accessible only through a locked gate like Abuela's. Acapulco is a dangerous city. The people take precautions here, even in nice neighborhoods like this one, especially in nice neighborhoods like this one. But what good are those protections when the men come? Luca leans his head against his mother's shoulder, and she puts an arm around him. She doesn't ask if he's okay, because from now on that question will carry a weight of painful absurdity. Lydia tries her best not to consider the many words that will never come out of her mouth now, the sudden monster void of words she will never get to say.

When they arrive, the police pull yellow *escena del crimen* tape across both ends of the block to discourage traffic and make room for the macabre motorcade of emergency vehicles. There are a lot of officers, a whole army of them, who move around and past Luca and Lydia with choreographed reverence. When the senior detective approaches and begins asking questions, Lydia hesitates for a moment, considering where to send Luca. He's too young to hear everything she needs to say. She should dispatch him to someone else for a few minutes, so she can give forthright answers to these dreadful questions. She should send him to his father. Her mother. Her sister, Yemi. But they are all dead in the backyard, their bodies as close as toppled dominoes. It's all meaningless anyway. The police aren't here to help. Lydia begins to sob. Luca stands and places the cold curve of his hand across the back of his mother's neck.

'Give her a minute,' he says, like a grown man.

When the detective returns, there's a woman with him, the medical examiner, who addresses Luca directly. She puts a hand on his shoulder and asks if he'd like to sit in her truck. It says SEMEFO on the side, and the back doors are standing open. Mami nods at him, so Luca goes with the woman and sits inside, dangling his feet over the back bumper. She

offers him a sweating can, a cold *refresco*.

Lydia's brain, which had been temporarily suspended by shock, begins working again, but it creeps like sludge. She's still sitting on the curb, and the detective stands between her and her son.

'Did you see the shooter?' he asks.

'Shooters, plural. I think there were three of them.' She wishes the detective would step aside so she can keep Luca in her line of sight. He's only a dozen steps away.

'You saw them?'

'No, we heard them. We were hiding in the shower. One came in and took a piss while we were in there. Maybe you can get fingerprints from the faucet. He washed his hands. Can you believe that?' Lydia claps her hands loudly, as if to scare off the memory. 'There were at least two more voices outside.'

'Did they say or do anything that might help identify them?'

She shakes her head. 'One ate the chicken.'

The detective writes *pollo* in his notebook.

'One asked if *he* was here.'

'A specific target? Did they say who *he* was? A name?'

'They didn't have to. It was my husband.'

The detective stops writing and looks at her expectantly. 'Your husband is?'

'Sebastián Pérez Delgado.'

'The reporter?'

Lydia nods, and the detective whistles through his teeth.

'He's here?'

She nods again. 'On the patio. With the spatula. With the sign.'

'I'm sorry, señora. Your husband received many threats, yes?'

'Yes, but not recently.'

'And what exactly was the nature of those threats?'

'They told him to stop writing about the cartels.'

'Or?'

'Or they would kill his whole family.' Her voice is flat.

The detective takes a deep breath and looks at Lydia with what might be interpreted as sympathy. 'When was the last time he was threatened?'

Lydia shakes her head. 'I don't know. A long time ago. This wasn't supposed to happen. It wasn't supposed to happen.'

The detective folds his lips into a thin line and remains silent.

‘They’re going to kill me, too,’ she says, understanding only as these words emerge that they might be true.

The detective does not move to contradict her. Unlike many of his colleagues – he’s not sure which ones, but it doesn’t matter – he happens not to be on the cartel payroll. He trusts no one. In fact, of the more than two dozen law enforcement and medical personnel moving around Abuela’s home and patio this very moment, marking the locations of shell casings, examining footprints, analyzing blood splatter, taking pictures, checking for pulses, making the sign of the cross over the corpses of Lydia’s family, seven receive regular money from the local cartel. The illicit payment is three times more than what they earn from the government. In fact, one has already texted *el jefe* to report Lydia’s and Luca’s survival. The others do nothing, because that’s precisely what the cartel pays them to do, to populate uniforms and perform the appearance of governance. Some of the personnel feel morally conflicted about this; others do not. None of them have a choice anyway, so their feelings are largely immaterial. The unsolved-crime rate in Mexico is well north of 90 percent. The costumed existence of *la policía* provides the necessary counterillusion to the fact of the cartel’s actual impunity. Lydia knows this. Everyone knows this. She decides presently that she must get out of here. She stands up from her position on the curb and is surprised by the strength of her legs beneath her. The detective steps back to give her space.

‘When he realizes I’ve survived they will return.’ And then the memory comes back to her like a throb: one of the voices in the yard asking, *What about the kid?* Lydia’s joints feel like water. ‘He’s going to murder my son.’

‘*He?*’ the detective says. ‘You know specifically who did this?’

‘Are you kidding me?’ she asks. There’s only one possible perpetrator for a bloodbath of this magnitude in Acapulco, and everyone knows who that man is. Javier Crespo Fuentes. Her friend. Why should she say his name out loud? The detective’s question is either a stage play or a test. He writes more words in his notebook. He writes, *La Lechuza?* He writes, *Los Jardineros?* And then shows the notebook to Lydia. ‘I can’t do this right now.’ She pushes past him.

‘Please, just a few more questions.’

‘No. No more questions. Zero more questions.’

There are sixteen bodies in the backyard, almost everyone Lydia loved

in the world, but she still feels on the precipice of this information – she knows it to be factual because she heard them die, she saw their bodies. She touched her mother’s still-warm hand and felt the absence of her husband’s pulse when she lifted his wrist. But her mind is still trying to rewind it, to undo it. Because it can’t really be true. It’s too horrific to be actually true. Panic feels imminent, but it doesn’t descend.

‘Luca, come.’ She reaches out her hand, and Luca hops down from the medical examiner’s truck. He leaves the still-full *refresco* on the back bumper.

Lydia grabs him, and together they walk down the street to where Sebastián parked their car, near the end of the block. The detective follows, still trying to speak to her. He doesn’t accept that she has quit the conversation. Was she not clear enough? She stops walking so abruptly he almost stumbles into her back. He draws up on his tiptoes to avoid a collision. She spins on her foot.

‘I need his keys,’ she says.

‘Keys?’

‘My husband’s car keys.’

The detective continues speaking as Lydia pushes past him again, pulling Luca along behind her. She goes back through the gate into Abuela’s courtyard and tells Luca to wait. Then she thinks better of it and brings him into the house. She sits him on Abuela’s gold velveteen couch with instructions not to move.

‘Can you stay with him, please?’

The detective nods.

Lydia pauses momentarily at the back door, and then squares her shoulders before pushing it open and stepping out. In the shade of the backyard, there’s the sweet odor of lime and sticky charred sauce, and Lydia knows she will never eat barbecue again. Some of her family members are covered now, and there are little bright yellow placards set up around the yard with black letters and numbers on them. The placards mark the locations of evidence that will never be used to seek a conviction. The placards make everything worse. Their presence means it’s real. Lydia is aware of her lungs inside her body – they feel raw and raggedy, a sensation she’s never experienced before. She steps toward Sebastián, who hasn’t moved, his left arm still bent awkwardly beneath him, the spatula jutting out from beneath his hip. The way he’s splayed there reminds Lydia of the shapes his body makes when he’s at his most vividly