

NOW IS NOT
the TIME
PANIC *to*
A Novel

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

KEVIN
WILSON
*Nothing
to
See Here*

NOW IS NOT
the TIME
to PANIC
A Novel

KEVIN
WILSON



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Dedication

In memory of Eric Matthew Hailey
(1973–2020)

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Mazzy Brower

I ANSWERED THE PHONE, AND THERE WAS A WOMAN'S VOICE on the other end, a voice that I didn't recognize. "Is this Frances Budge?" she asked, and I was certain it was a telemarketer, because nobody called me Frances. In the living room, my seven-year-old daughter had made her own set of drums, including a tin plate for a cymbal, so it was loud as hell in the house, with this ting-bang-ting-ting-bang rhythm she had going on. I said, "I'm sorry, but I'm not interested," and started to hang up, but the woman, understanding that I was done with her, tried her best to pull me in.

"The edge is a shantytown filled with gold seekers," she said, her voice rising in pitch, and I froze. I nearly dropped the phone. And together, in harmony, we both completed the phrase, "We are fugitives, and the law is skinny with hunger for us."

"So you know it," the woman said.

"I've heard it before, yeah, of course," I said, already trying to run away. I could feel the world spinning around me. *Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, fuck, no* in my head, a kind of spiraling madness, because, you know, it had been so long ago. Because, I guess, I'd let myself think that no one would ever find out. But she'd found me. And I was already trying to figure out how to get lost again, to stay lost.

"I'm writing an article for the *New Yorker*," she told me. "My name is Mazzy Brower, and I'm an art critic. I'm writing about the Coalfield Panic of 1996."

"Okay," I said.

"Mom!" my daughter Junie was shouting. "Listen! Listen to me! Listen! It's 'Wipe Out,' right? Doesn't this sound just like 'Wipe Out'? Mom? Listen!"

"And I think you made it happen," the woman said, treading carefully. Her voice sounded nice, honest.

"You think I made it?" I said, almost laughing, but it was true. I *had* made it. Not just me, but I was part of it. Me and one other person.

"I'm almost one hundred percent certain that it was you," Mazzy Brower said.

"Oh god," I said, and I realized I was saying it out loud. My daughter

was banging away. I felt dizzy. There was a pizza in the oven. My husband was finally fixing the latch on a window in our bedroom, which we'd been meaning to fix for four solid months. Our life, which was so boring and normal, was still happening. Right at this moment, as everything was changing, it was like my life didn't know it yet. It didn't know to just stop, to freeze, because nothing was going to be the same. Let the pizza burn. Forget about that stupid, shitty latch on the window. Pack up your stuff. Let's get the hell out of here. Let's burn down the house and start over. For a split second, I thought maybe just *I* could get out of here and start over.

"Was it you?" the reporter asked. Why had I picked up the phone?

"Yes," I finally said, and I could feel my whole body being pulled through time. "Yes, it was me."

"Just you?" she asked.

"It's complicated," I replied. My daughter was now standing beside me, pulling on the back of my shirt. "Mama?" she asked. "Who are you talking to?"

"Just a friend," I told her.

"Let me talk to her," Junie said, the most confident person I'd ever known, holding out her hand for the phone.

"I have to go," I said to Mazzy.

"Can we meet?"

"No," I said.

"Can I call you back?"

"Sorry, no," I told her. And before she could say anything else, I hung up the phone.

I started to pace around the kitchen, trying to remember every word of the conversation, what I'd said to this woman. But Junie hates pacing, hates when she sees me go inside myself, and so she started tugging on my pants.

"What's your friend's name?" Junie asked.

"What? Oh . . . Mazzy," I said.

"Mazzy sounds like an imaginary friend," Junie said.

"Maybe she is," I told her. "I'm not entirely sure that she's real."

"You're so weird, Mama," Junie said, smiling. And then, like it didn't matter at all, because she'd already forgotten, she said, "Listen to me play these crazy drums!"

There was still time. I sat on the couch. And I watched my daughter, with two wooden spoons in her hands, absolutely whale away on anything that was around her. And my heart was pounding in my chest. It was over, I kept thinking. It was all over. And it was beginning. It was just

beginning.

Part I

The Edge Is a Shantytown Filled with Gold Seekers

SUMMER 1996

One

AT THE COALFIELD PUBLIC POOL, THEY WOULD BLOW A WHISTLE and everybody had to get out of the water, and we'd all stand there, hopping on one foot and then the other because the concrete was so damn hot, burning the bottoms of our feet. And some lifeguard, barely older than I was, sixteen, looking like the bad guy in a teen movie, blond and buff and absolutely never going to save you if you were drowning, would wheel out a greased watermelon. There was a three-inch layer of Vaseline, which made the watermelon shiny, almost like it was turning from a solid into a liquid. And the lifeguard and one of his evil twins, maybe with crazier muscles and a scuzzy mustache, would dump this watermelon into the water and then push it to the middle of the pool.

And when they blew their whistles, the point was to jump into the water, and then whoever could get the watermelon to the edge of the pool would win it. You had to team up, really, to reasonably expect to win the thing, and so the game would turn into a kind of gang war, boys basically beating the shit out of each other, this watermelon slipping and sliding away from them, almost an afterthought. By the time it made it to the edge, the watermelon was covered in gouges from fingernails, pieces of the red meat of the fruit spilling out of it, pretty much inedible to anyone except the person who'd won it. I was smart enough to stay away, though it made me mad that no girls ever really took part, like we were too delicate for things like this. But the only time I'd tried, when I was twelve, some old man with a snake tattoo on his arm elbowed me in the face and nearly knocked out my front teeth.

The triplets, my brothers, were perfect for the greased watermelon contest, because they were eighteen and already giant. They were nearly feral, possessing a kind of strength that wasn't just physical but a

psychosis that made them impervious to pain, which they tested out on each other all the time. But they didn't take part, either, because they used this time while everyone else was hypnotized by the watermelon to steal money and snacks from unattended bags.

I was standing there, my feet blistering, wondering why I didn't just go lie down on my towel and wait for the time when I could safely wade back into the pool and . . . what, exactly? Just keep wading around and around, so you could never quite tell that I was alone? I hated the pool, but the A/C had blown out back home and it would be another day before it was fixed. I'd held out for two straight days, sweating and miserable, but finally hopped in the van with my brothers that morning. Honestly, if I had to be here, I wanted to see the fight over this thing. I wanted to hear the shouts and curses. I wanted to see violence done in the name of fun.

A boy was watching me from across the pool. I could see him, skinny and twitchy, probably about my age, and every single time I caught him looking at me, he'd smile this goofy smile and then stare down at the water, the sun reflecting off of it so brightly that it was blinding. I lost sight of him. Any second now, the lifeguards were going to blow their whistles. And then I felt somebody touch my elbow, which for some reason felt really intimate and weird, someone's fingers on my rough, bony elbow. I whirled around, and it was the boy, his eyes black, his hair black, his teeth bright white and painfully crooked. "Hey," he said, and I pulled my arm away from him.

"Don't touch people that don't like being touched," I told him. He held up his hands in surrender, looking shy all of a sudden. Who touches a girl's elbow and then gets shy?

"Sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. I'm new. I just moved here. I don't know anybody. I've been watching you. It looks like you don't know anybody, either."

"I know everyone," I said, gesturing to the entire congregation of poolgoers. "I know them all. I just don't *like* them."

He nodded. He understood. "Will you help me get this watermelon?" he asked.

"Me?" I asked, confused.

"You and me," he said. "I think we can do it."

"Okay, sure," I said, nodding, smiling.

"All right," he said, his face brightening. "What's your name?" he asked me.

"Frankie," I told him.

"Cool. I like girls who have boys' names," he told me, like he was the

most open-minded boy who had ever lived.

“Frankie isn’t a boy’s name. It’s unisex.”

“My name is Zeke,” he told me.

“Zeke?” I said.

“Ezekiel,” he explained. “It’s biblical. But it’s my middle name. I’m trying it out this summer. Just to see how it sounds.”

I was looking at him. He wasn’t handsome; all of his features were too big, cartoonish. But I wasn’t pretty, either. I had a really plain face. I convinced myself, at the right angle, that even though I was plain, it was temporary and soon I’d be pretty. I told myself that I definitely wasn’t ugly. My brothers, however, said I was ugly. Whatever. I cared so much, but I put a lot of effort into not caring. I was punk rock. Maybe it was better to be ugly if the alternative was to be plain.

The whistle blew, and we were just staring at each other, but then he said, “C’mon. We can do this!” and he jumped right into the pool. I did not jump into the pool. I just stood there. I smirked, watched him bob in the water. And he looked so hurt. It made me feel real shitty. Finally, he shrugged and started splashing toward the commotion, toward that roiling mass of teenage boys, all fighting over something so stupid, for fun.

Zeke tried two or three times, but he kept getting roughly tossed aside, dunked under the water, and he’d come up gasping, coughing, looking so lost out there on his own. But he kept climbing over people, trying to get his hands on the watermelon, which was so slippery that no one could really control it. And then somebody kicked him accidentally in the mouth and I saw that his lip was busted. It was bleeding, dripping into the pool, but the lifeguards did not give a shit. I don’t think they were even watching. And Zeke just jumped back into the crowd, and I started to get worried. I knew something bad would happen to someone this clueless.

Before I could think about it, I was running over to my brother Andrew, who had, like, seven bags of snack-size Doritos, and I told him that I needed his help. Right then, Brian came over, a wad of damp dollar bills in his fist. “C’mon, Andrew,” he said, completely ignoring me. “We don’t have all day.”

“I need help,” I said, and by this point, Charlie had come over, wondering what was going on. “I need you to help this boy get the watermelon,” I told all three of them.

“Fuck no,” Charlie said. “No way.”

“Please?” I asked them.

“Sorry, Frankie,” Andrew told me, and they started to run off, but I shouted, “I’ll give you twenty dollars!”

“Twenty bucks?” Brian asked. “No shit?”

“Twenty bucks,” I said.

“And what do we do now?”

“See that nerdy kid in the water? With the busted lip?” I told them. They all nodded. “Help him get the watermelon,” I said. It was pretty simple, but they kept staring at the watermelon.

“You in love with him?” Charlie asked me, grinning.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think I feel sorry for him.”

“Yikes,” Andrew said, grimacing, like I was cursed. “Fine. We’ll do it.” And my brothers dropped all the stuff they were carrying and ran to the edge of the pool, cannonballing into the water. Andrew grabbed Zeke like a rag doll and basically carried him toward the watermelon while Brian and Charlie cleared a path using their elbows, the ferocity of their actions overwhelming the other kids, who had been wrestling over the watermelon for long enough that they were starting to tire out. When they got possession of the watermelon, a sorry-looking sight, Andrew threw Zeke onto it, and the triplets pushed him to the edge of the water, Zeke’s mouth dripping blood onto the Vaseline. And then it was over. Zeke had won.

The lifeguards blew their whistles, and the other kids acted like they didn’t care. Their chests and arms were glistening with the grease, and it wasn’t coming off in the water, but they just started splashing around, waiting for the girls to get back into the pool, the kids in their floaties, the dads with their beer guts and sad tattoos.

I walked over to the edge of the pool, where Zeke was trying to catch his breath. My brothers had already left, gone to find new ways to distract themselves.

“You did it,” I said.

“Who were those boys?” he asked, so confused.

“My brothers,” I told him.

“You did this?” he asked me, and I nodded. We both laughed.

“Your mouth is bleeding,” I told him, but he didn’t seem to care. We both stared at the watermelon, which looked like a horror movie, so many half-moon marks digging into the green rind, that greasy, disgusting film all over it.

“Will you eat this with me?” he asked.

“You’re going to fucking eat that?” I asked.

“We’re going to eat it,” he said, smiling. And we did. We really did. It was so good.

Two

IT WAS SUMMER, WHICH MEANT THAT NOTHING WAS HAPPENING. It was insanely hot, making it hard to care about anything other than eating Popsicles. My house was empty; my mom was working, my dad was in Milwaukee with his new family, and the triplets were all flipping burgers at different fast-food restaurants. I'd wander the house, listening to music on my headphones, never changing out of my pajamas. I was supposed to get a job, but I hadn't filled out any of the applications. I was fine with just keeping up my babysitting gigs. My mom, who loved me so much and was so tired, gave up, let me have the house to myself, and at first I was happy for the silence, but soon it began to feel oppressive, like the walls knew I was the only person there and could shrink down to hold me in place.

I wasn't looking for a friend or anything like that. I was bored. And Zeke, this new boy who seemed stunned to find himself in this dinky little town, was something that could occupy my time.

Two days after we'd first met at the public pool, after I gave him a little piece of paper with my address on it, Zeke rode his bike over to my house. He had on an oversize black Road Warriors T-shirt, two angry wrestlers, their faces painted, weird shoulder pads. My brothers loved these dudes, too. I couldn't imagine people who seemed more different than Zeke and my brothers, but if you were a boy, there were just things you loved, I guess.

"Hey," he said, smiling. "I live, like, four blocks away."

I just shrugged, unsure of what to do now that he was here.

"Thanks for inviting me," he said. I shrugged again. What was wrong with my tongue? Why did it feel so fuzzy?

"This town is weird," he said. "It's like a bomb was dropped on it, and you guys are just getting back to normal."

“It’s pretty boring,” I finally said, and my jaws ached with the effort.

“It’s always better to be bored with someone else,” he offered. I gestured for him to follow me inside, into the air-conditioning.

I didn’t know exactly what to do with him, but I wanted it to be clear that we weren’t going to have sex in my empty house. I had been nervous over the past two days, worrying what I was or was not getting myself into, all the things that I did not yet want to do. I needed Zeke to know that it wasn’t that kind of thing, so we just sat on the sofa and watched horror movies on VHS, eating Pop-Tarts, which felt so far away from what I thought sex might be that it seemed safe. I was trying to put off talking for as long as possible, until it became inevitable. By then, I thought, I’d have something interesting to tell him.

“Do you like it here?” Zeke asked me while I was taking out one tape and trying to put in another. And now we had to talk. I guessed I was okay with this.

“It’s fine,” I said, crouched over the VHS machine. And it was, honestly. What would I do in a city? Go dancing? Eat a fifty-dollar steak at some fancy restaurant? Well, I mean, maybe go to a museum. That would be fun. But I was sixteen. I lived inside of myself way more than I lived inside of this town.

“But,” he said, pressing me, “what do you do for fun?”

“This,” I said, frustrated, holding up a copy of *Fright Night*. What did he want from me? Did I have to prove to him that I was cool, that I didn’t belong in Coalfield? “Why?” I finally asked, turning it back on him. “Where did you come from that’s so great?”

“Memphis,” he said. “And it’s not so great, really. But, you know, there’s some okay stuff. Memphis Chicks baseball games. Mall of Memphis, you can ice-skate there. Audubon Park.”

“Well, okay, that does sound pretty cool. Ice-skating would be cool.”

“But,” he said, smiling, “here we are.”

“Why did you move here?” I asked him.

“I didn’t have any say in it. It’s messed up.” He kind of looked at me for a few seconds, like he was trying to decide what he would and would not tell me. And this intrigued me, that his story required editing. I got up off the floor and sat next to him on the sofa.

“My dad’s been having an affair,” he told me. “I guess he’s been having a few of them, because one of the women found out about the other one.”

“Oh, god,” I said.

“Yeah, and she called our house to rat him out, but I answered the

phone. And she told me about how he was really a bad guy and was treating her wrong, and that I needed to divorce him and then get that other lady to stop seeing him, and only then would she think about staying with him, and I was like, ‘Ma’am, I’m his son,’ and she said, ‘Oh, honey, you have such a high voice,’ and I hung up.”

“Your voice isn’t that high,” I offered.

“Well, on the phone I try to be super polite, so my voice is soft. It’s no big deal. That’s not really what made me so mad.”

“No, I know, but still.”

“Yeah, thanks, but the point is, I got angry and I kicked a hole in the wall and my mom ran in and I told her what was happening. We got in the car and drove to my dad’s office, and she started shouting at him in front of other people, and then, well . . .”

“What?” I asked.

“I don’t really remember, honestly. Sometimes, when I get really stressed, I just kind of lose myself? Like I go into some trance, my ears start ringing. I feel kind of fuzzy and hot. And I can kind of be . . . destructive, I guess. Not often, right? But sometimes. Anyways, my mom says that I jumped on my dad and tried to claw his eyes out and some of my dad’s employees had to drag me off of him and hold me down. Like, they sat on me for a pretty long time. They said I was speaking in tongues or something.”

“Jesus, Zeke,” I said, but I kind of wished that I had been able to do that to my dad.

“My dad’s secretary asked if she should call the cops, and he said not to. He said we’d get me into a hospital or something, but my mom nixed that. She packed us up, and we drove here because this is where my grandmother lives. I guess my mom grew up here, but she never really talked about it, and she doesn’t seem so jazzed about being back. So we’re here until my mom decides what to do about my dad. She says we might be here forever or we might go back in a month. She just doesn’t know.”

“That sucks,” I told him.

“And, I don’t know, I want to go back home. I miss my house, you know? I have to go back to school at the end of the summer, right? But I don’t really feel like it would be so great if my mom just went back to him. Unless he really changed. But how long would it take for someone like that to change? It feels like it could be a long time.”

“My dad left us,” I told him. “Two years ago. He got his secretary pregnant, and he told my mom just a few days before their anniversary because the secretary was getting mad at him for not telling my mom, and

then a few days later, he and this woman moved up north. I guess he'd been planning it for a while. He got a transfer. I think it was a promotion. I don't know. He kept saying 'a fresh start,' but he meant for him and this woman and, you know, that dumb baby. It's a girl. And you know what they named it?"

"What?" he asked.

"Frances," I said. "That's my grandmother's name, his mom. I never even knew her; she died when I was little. But still. I mean, that's my name."

"That's fucked up," he admitted.

"I thought so," I said. "My mom really thought so."

"Does he call the baby Frankie?" he asked.

"I'm afraid to ask," I said. "He sent us a birth announcement, and it was all fancy so it just said *Frances*."

"Do you talk to him?" he asked.

"Never," I said. "He sends us money because he has to, but I don't talk to him. I'll never talk to him."

"I haven't talked to my dad since we moved here," Zeke told me. "I keep thinking maybe he'll call, but he doesn't. Maybe he doesn't have our number."

"Would you talk to him if he called?" I asked. I felt like his answer was important.

"Probably not. Not because I don't want to talk to him, but I feel like it would hurt his feelings if I shut him out. Like, he should be punished, right?"

"He should be," I told him. I wanted to grab his hand for emphasis, but I was weird around boys. I was weird around people in general. I didn't like touching people or being touched. But Zeke needed to know. You had to choose sides. And you always chose the person who didn't fuck everything up. You chose the person who was stuck with you.

"So," he said, looking up at me. "We're both kind of alone in the same way, right?"

"I guess so," I said. He looked like he might kiss me. Or maybe not. I'd never been this close to a boy. I knew there had to be a moment, some signal, that regular people could sense in order to go from being people who didn't kiss to being people who kissed. What the hell was it? How could I make sure not to do it until the exact right moment? His eyes were so dark, but they kind of twinkled. I felt light-headed.

"Are you hungry?" I asked him, jumping up from the sofa. "Do you want something to eat?"

“Um, sure,” he said. “I’m hungry.” And before he could even finish talking, I was running into the kitchen, opening the fridge, feeling the cool air on my face. Was this how love worked? You shared something personal, stood close to each other? I wasn’t attracted to him. I didn’t know him. All I knew was that we both had dads who sucked. All I knew was that we were both alone.

Zeke was standing at the kitchen counter. I turned to face him, shutting the door to the fridge. There wasn’t much in there. I didn’t know what to do. The house felt really empty. So I just said something to break up the silence.

“I’m a writer,” I told him.

“Really?” he replied. He seemed impressed.

“Well, I mean, I want to be. That’s what I want to do. I want to write books.”

“That’s cool,” he said. “I like books. Stephen King? You like him?”

“He’s okay,” I said, but I actually didn’t like him all that much. I liked southern writers, because that’s what my mom taught me to love. I liked badass women southern writers like Flannery O’Connor and Carson McCullers. I liked Dorothy Allison and Bobbie Ann Mason and Alice Walker.

Oh, but really, truly, I loved Carolyn Keene. I loved Nancy Drew books. I loved the Dana Girls. And maybe I was too old for those books now, but I still read them, over and over. I didn’t want to get into all of that with Zeke. If he had never read *The Member of the Wedding*, then I might cry. It would make me so sad.

“I like Philip K. Dick,” he said, and I had no idea who that was. We were getting nowhere.

“I’m writing a book,” I said. I’d never told anyone. Not even my mom, who would have been delighted to hear it. “It’s like Nancy Drew, you know? But, she’s bad. She’s the one doing the crimes. And her dad is the police chief, but she keeps outsmarting him. And her sister is the girl detective, but she’s not very good at it.”

“Is it for kids?” Zeke asked, confused.

“I honestly don’t know,” I admitted. “I haven’t figured it all out yet.”

“Well . . . cool,” Zeke said, and I believed him. “I want to be an artist,” he told me, like we were both admitting that we weren’t human. We didn’t understand how normal this was, to be young, to believe that you were destined to make beautiful things.

“What kind of artist?” I asked him.

“Comic books,” he told me. “Drawings? Weird stuff, really.” His eyes

lit up. He looked so happy. “And real art, too. Like, big things, complicated things. I want to make something that everyone in the world will see. And they’ll remember it. And they won’t totally understand it.”

“I know what you mean,” and I did.

“That’s what we should do this summer,” he said, like a lightbulb appeared over his head. He, honest to god, snapped his fingers.

“What?” I asked him.

“We should make stuff,” he said.

“Well,” I said, nervous, “I’m still working on the novel. It’s not finished. It’s just a rough draft, really.”

“Okay, okay,” he said. “We can figure it out. It would be fun to do something together, though.”

“Just spend all summer making art?” I asked, confused.

“All summer,” he said. “What else were you gonna do?”

“Okay,” I told him, nodding. “But what if your dad fixes himself and you go back in a few weeks?”

He thought about this. “I don’t think that’s gonna happen,” he told me, and we both laughed.

And that was it. That was going to be our summer. If something happened to me, it would happen to him. The next few months opened up, turned shimmery in the heat. We’d make something.

So, we were friends now. And maybe, by August, we’d be best friends. It had been a long time since I’d had a best friend. Zeke was still smiling, still staring at me, like I was supposed to say something, like I was supposed to do something important. I felt like if I did the wrong thing right now, if I messed up, it would all go wrong. But I was frozen, staring at him. Finally, he said, “So are we gonna eat lunch?”

I took such a deep breath. “Oh, yeah, sure. Let’s, um, let’s go to Hardee’s,” I told him. “My brother works there. He’ll give us free fries.”

And after I scrounged around my room for money, we went outside, where my shitty Honda Civic was parked in the driveway. I tried to remember what was in the cassette player, if it was cool. Maybe it wouldn’t matter to Zeke. Right now, with the sun so high in the sky, we walked side by side. We’d make art later. There was, I thought, so much time.