

“A standout debut about family, secrets, and the costs of protecting a precious legacy.”

—**FIONA DAVIS**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Magnolia Palace*



LEIGH McMULLAN ABRAMSON

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A
LIKELY
STORY

A Novel

Leigh McMullan Abramson

ATRIA BOOKS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

For my parents

*Well, I've been afraid of changing
'Cause I've built my life around you*

—**Stevie Nicks**

Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth.

—**Albert Camus**

PROLOGUE

New York, 1989

Claire stood with her back to the bar and surveyed the pulsating mass of people deeply pleased with themselves for being exactly where they were at exactly that moment. The party was an unqualified success. She kept being congratulated, as if it took genius to send invitations, rent out a restaurant—even a hot one like Gotham—and tell her florist, *it's an avian theme, go wild*. The maple branches growing out of birdcages were something, but Claire did not take pride in floral arrangements. As she and her husband had grown wealthy to the point of rich, Claire was wary of becoming one of those Upper East Side types who mistook purchased goods and services for accomplishment.

Claire had not read the book. As she nodded and smiled, agreeing with everyone about what a special, *important* novel it was, this secret blasphemy twinkled pleasantly inside her. Several yards away, the author was in the crowd, holding forth. The noise of the room was too loud for Claire to hear the specifics. After a decade of marriage, Claire couldn't imagine there was a subject she had not heard Ward expound upon, but she studied him still. By his theatrical gestures and exaggerated facial expressions, he was drunk.

“Can we get these at home, Mommy?”

Claire turned toward Isabelle, who was sitting cross-legged on a stool next to her. The bartender had given Isabelle open access to the tray of maraschino cherries, and she was now holding one aloft by the stem, swinging it talisman-like in front of her face. A viscous, chemical red dripped onto the smocking of her Laura Ashley dress.

“They're more of a special occasion treat.”

Isabelle sighed. “I thought so.” Isabelle had come with Claire to the hairdresser that day, and her daughter's blond tresses had been plaited and pinned on her head, threaded with baby's breath. The long evening had left

Isabelle with loose strands and a halo of frizz. And after the cherries there was a subtle, almost clownish red ring around her mouth. Claire felt an ache of love for her only child.

“I took off my shoes,” said Isabelle.

Claire looked down. “So you did.”

Isabelle started to yawn, before stopping herself. “I don’t feel tired at all.” The plan had been to send Isabelle back uptown with a babysitter. But Isabelle had lobbied persuasively to stay. So it was the babysitter who’d left, and Isabelle who remained, now several hours past bedtime.

“Hmmm,” said Claire, kissing her on her head.

“I think I should come to all your parties,” said Isabelle.

“Oh do you?”

Isabelle was looking down, her fingers moving over the charm that hung from her neck on a delicate chain. “Don’t you love my necklace?” she asked, thrusting forward the gold miniature replica of Ward’s new book, custom-ordered at Tiffany’s. God knows how much it had cost. Claire had not been consulted on the purchase.

“It’s very nice.”

Isabelle smiled and began to play with her mother’s hair. A series of sharp pings broke through the noise. Ward’s publicist was standing on one of the banquettes, tapping a knife on a champagne flute. Isabelle looked up.

“Daddy’s going to talk now,” whispered Claire.

Ward took the microphone and climbed onto the banquette, a move that elicited cheers from the audience. Ward raised his fist in triumph, before making a patting motion in the air, like a coach quieting his team. His newly graying hair sprang voluminously from his scalp in a wide circumference. He wore his signature red-framed glasses, cartoonish on anyone who wasn’t arguably the hottest literary writer in America. It was becoming more and more difficult to conceive of the before, the time when her husband had not been *the* Ward Manning. But not so many years ago, Ward was just another guy with a pile of pages, hustling a manuscript. Once upon a time, standing on a banquette wouldn’t have gotten Ward applause; it would’ve gotten him fired. Now the lavish book parties, the award ceremonies, the inductions, the famous-people dinner soirées bled into one another. Yesterday evening, *Nightingale Call* had debuted at number one on the *New York Times* bestseller

list. Whatever Ward published, people would read it. The number of authors—*literary* authors—who could do that was small indeed. People recognized him on the street, approached his table in restaurants. Ward was mythical, a god of letters. Just as Ward once promised her, he had become very famous.

Ward smiled without speaking for a long moment, reveling in the hushed anticipation.

“Two years ago, I started this book,” Ward finally said. “I wanted to give myself a challenge.” He paused.

“I decided I’d write about a guy who goes to live with the birds. Try making that not fucking boring.”

A big laugh.

Isabelle giggled. The profanity didn’t seem to have registered. Like everyone else’s in the room, her daughter’s eyes had not moved from Ward. He went on to thank a list of people. Claire raised her glass and smiled when he said her name.

“And my daughter is here tonight.”

Everyone turned to Isabelle and clapped. Isabelle blushed and put her hands over her face, which elicited a collective *awwww*.

“Come here, sweetheart,” said Ward, beckoning.

Claire had not been alerted that Isabelle was to be part of the show, but she picked Isabelle off the stool. At seven years old, her daughter was almost too heavy for her, but not quite. Claire set her down and smoothed the back of Isabelle’s dress before she took off toward her father. Ward, who’d stepped off the banquette, scooped her up and placed Isabelle on his shoulders. “Isn’t she beautiful?” People whistled. Ward was blatantly using their daughter as a prop, manipulating the crowd with this heartwarming visual, as if he were father of the year. Claire looked at Isabelle, searching for the subtle signs of distress that only a mother would see. Instead she watched as Isabelle took the crowd on, bright-eyed, smiling coyly, her little stocking feet resting on Ward’s chest.

Until that night, Claire was meticulous in shielding their daughter from her father’s fame. And she’d believed that Isabelle was still oblivious. Ward was just her father. But seeing her child aloft at this grown-up party, Claire knew she had been kidding herself. Isabelle knew about her father. She understood what was happening in the room, and she understood the role she could play in it.

Claire watched the two of them gamely mug for a photographer from the *New York Post*. For the first time, it was Claire who was on the outside.

When the applause subsided, Claire watched Ward put Isabelle down on the ground again. He was pulled away by his editor, leaving Isabelle alone. She was suddenly tiny in the sea of full-grown bodies. She looked up at adults carrying on their own conversations, no longer interested, as her smile fell and her brow creased slightly.

Claire bent down to pick up Isabelle's Mary Janes before pushing through the crowd. She took Isabelle's hand, put on her shoes, and, without bothering with goodbyes, led her out onto the street. In the taxi, Isabelle lay down with her head in Claire's lap and was quickly asleep. Claire gazed out the window, a roiling inside her.

Long ago, she had made peace with her bargain. She'd known what she was getting into. Going along with one version of the story, allowing certain truths to be hidden—it hadn't cost her much. Or so she'd thought. As she blessed the narrative, over and over, year after year, she had never anticipated how she would feel when it was her own daughter who believed in it. Claire longed now to undo what had been done, to make Isabelle understand what was left unsaid. But as she sat in the car, speeding up Park Avenue, Claire feared she was already too late.

PART I

New York, 2017

Isabelle

Isabelle had told herself this would be the easy part. The service was over. She had delivered her eulogy. She had been to the family plot that smelled toxically of lilies and manure. All that was left to do was drink and absorb the condolences of the dozens of family members and friends now occupying her parents' living room. But she understood now that this, this party with the missing guest of honor, would be worse than what had come before it. The mass of people around her only amplified the loneliness growing over her insides like mold. She did not want to hear from some off-brand cousin how wonderful her mother was. *A real class act*, people kept saying. As if Isabelle needed to be told.

“Here. Trade.” Brian stood beside her with a fresh glass of white. He handed it to her, taking her nearly empty one.

“You read my mind.”

Brian nodded. “Still a big crowd.”

“Everyone looks a bit too comfortable,” said Isabelle, shaking her head. The reception had started at four and showed no signs of stopping at a quarter to seven. The apartment was swimming with people, and Isabelle had decided she hated all of them. For her guests, this event soaked up a few hours of a Tuesday afternoon. Afterward they would return to their quotidian concerns and routines.

“Some people claiming to be your relatives just asked me when we'd gotten married.”

Isabelle smirked. “What did you tell them?”

“That I'm just a side piece.”

“Ha. That’s good,” said Isabelle. “I hope it was the Connecticut contingency—those constipated people over there.” She gestured with her chin. “They need to be scandalized. My mother loathed them.” Isabelle took a sip of her wine. “Secretly of course.”

“Of course.” Brian added, “I said we were just good friends.”

“I know you did.” Clarifying that they were not in fact engaged, dating, or even fucking, was something that both Brian and Isabelle did with regularity.

“By the way, this has solidified it for me. If I ever get married, I am not having a wedding. I do not need to see my extended family ever again.”

“Noted.”

Isabelle paused. “And, anyway, I could never have a wedding without my mother.” This is what happened now. Isabelle would forget herself for a moment, a seemingly benign thought would slip through the grief filter, and then, the reminder would pop into her brain, beeping and vibrating, like one of those iPhone storm alerts: YOUR MOTHER IS DEAD.

The last few weeks still had a surreal quality. It had started with a freakishly early case of the flu, nothing some rest wouldn’t cure. But then there was a secondary infection, and the string of ineffective antibiotics. Things quickly spiraled. High fever. Fainting. Hospitalization. Sepsis. More infection. Spreading. Nights spent folded into upholstered hospital chairs with slick spots like old, worn-over gum. But Isabelle had not thought this was *the end*. She dismissed Claire’s urgent directives about what to do “after” as her mother’s fear talking. It was only when her mother developed MRSA, an antibiotic-resistant superbug, and slipped into unconsciousness, her organs giving out one by one, that Isabelle understood. By then it was too late to say goodbye. For the last week, Isabelle had allowed immediate concerns, numbers, statistics, vital signs, and the beep and hum of machines to crowd out reflections of missed opportunities. But now all would be quiet.

Isabelle looked over the sea of heads to the living room windows. The third floor aligned with the tops of the trees planted along Fifth Avenue. It was the middle of September; the leaves were still green, but with a brown curdle at the edges. Summer had ended without Isabelle’s notice.

Brian put his arm around her. “Want me to get rid of everyone?”

“Yes, please. But how?”

“I’ll say that you need to rest.”

Isabelle laughed. “That won’t do it. These people are animals. We’d have to cut off the oxygen—stop serving booze.”

“I’m glad you still have your sense of humor.”

“I wasn’t kidding.”

“Want me to tell the caterer?”

Isabelle sighed. “No. Having people around is probably good for my father. He does best with an audience.” Ward was in the living room near the bar, where he’d been for several minutes. Isabelle’s ability to track her father while simultaneously doing other things was a skill she’d perfected in childhood when he was always about to jet off on a book tour or shut himself up in his study for the evening.

The front door opened, and a group of underdressed young people walked in, looking like they’d lost their way. Of course they were here.

“Who are they?” Brian asked.

“The MFAs,” said Isabelle.

At another time, Isabelle would have gone over to greet them. She once reveled in the blatant stares of Ward’s students, imagining them discussing her, the spawn of their idol, in hushed, reverent tones. She’d make a point to schedule lunch dates with her father on Ward’s teaching days so she could pick him up at Columbia and feel the specialness of being Isabelle Manning at its most acute. But now she kept her distance. At thirty-four—nearly thirty-five!—she was older than most of his students, sometimes much older, and there was too little to separate their aspirational circumstances from her own. In their eyes she saw only the question that ran on a loop through her own mind: What the hell had happened to Isabelle Manning?

Ward

A phalanx of sheath-wearing women of a certain age stood between Ward and his second martini. By the teeth and headbands, he’d identified them as Claire’s childhood friends from *the club*. It was unnerving to see these women in dark mourner’s garb. They existed for Ward perennially in summer, gin and tonic in hand, tennis whites exposing pointy elbows and runny knees.

“Oh Ward, I’m so sorry,” said a jowly woman holding a smudgy wineglass. She came close enough for him to see tributaries of lipstick in the tiny wrinkles around her mouth. She smelled of WASP, a stale, churchy mix of booze and Wheat Thins. Ward had once known the woman’s name, but that information now existed in the vast landfill of the forgotten. He gave her the widower nod—eyes half-closed, lips flattened Muppet-like into a weary grimace. He was eager to get away from her, procure his drink, and return to the task of finding someone important to flatter him.

“And how is Isabelle?” the woman asked.

“She’s holding up.” Ward believed this was true, in as much as such a platitude could be true. Ward wanted to help his daughter during this critical moment. Of course. But he did hope that the maintenance of her emotional well-being—always Claire’s expertise—would fall within someone else’s purview. Consoler-in-chief was not a role in which Ward would excel. His daughter had others to support her. That boy who was not a boyfriend. And there was Glenda. Glenda was his best hope.

“You’ll excuse me,” said Ward, moving away from the woman and closer to the bar. The reception following the memorial had been Glenda’s idea. “People need an outlet, Ward. To mourn,” his wife’s closest friend had told him. So Isabelle had hired the caterers, extended invites. And here they were. It occurred to him now, watching the inebriated hordes tucking into pigs in a blanket and bearing down on his upholstery, that perhaps Glenda’s home, an even bigger spread several blocks south on Park, would have made a better “outlet.” And no one was mourning. He’d seen Glenda going hard at the cheese table and doing what everyone else was doing: drinking. Real mourning could not be calendared in like a dentist appointment. It snuck up, occurring in pauses, the little empty pockets of life. Ward did not like to be snuck up on. The day before, he was standing in his kitchen when he’d spied a grocery list written out on a white pad in his wife’s elegant hand. *Green apples, salad things, loads of seltzer, pistachios.* Before he realized what was happening, he was crying. Sobbing, really. He had not cried since he was a child, and it was a truly off-putting experience. Ward did not intend to be caught off guard again. Luckily, Ward would not have the time to break down. He was facing one of the tightest deadlines of his career.

Ward had barely written of late. The ostensible reason was his wife's sickness. But the real impediment could trace its origins to years, maybe decades, earlier. It had begun as a harmless guilty pleasure, an occasional indulgence that had given him a little boost now and then. But in the last several months—long before what happened to Claire—it had turned into something else. Something out of his control, verging on pernicious. But Ward had a plan. Today would be the last day of the letters.

Before the party, he'd hauled up a large sack of fan mail to his study in anticipation of one final bender. After all he'd been through, he deserved it. And then complete abstinence. He'd roll up his sleeves and get to work.

There was a tap on his shoulder. He turned and saw a tiny woman, wiry gray hair secured in a ponytail, in an oversized blazer.

"Ward," she said as she leaned in for a kiss on the cheek. She looked familiar, but the specifics evaded him. "I'm sorry—"

"Thank you—"

"—that we couldn't give Claire more space."

Ward nodded as if he knew what the woman was referring to. He'd gotten good at this pretending. The pretending was easier when someone else was speaking. The more vexatious was the sudden disappearance of words and entire phrases from his lexicon, the feeling that they were there, but just beyond his horizon. Trying to forcibly remember them, to muscle them back into the spongy matter of hippocampus, only seemed to make it worse. It had happened that morning at the memorial. He had gone off his notes. "Claire left all of us feeling more—" and he just blanked. He finished with "energized," but that was not quite right. It was not until after the service he remembered the word, coming to him like a clap of thunder. *Invigorated*. He had forgotten "invigorated." A simple, fourth-grade word, nothing special about it, but it had floated maddeningly out of reach. This was the kind of forgetting that ate at his soul.

"Some physicist had to die the same day," the woman continued in her husky voice. "I'd never heard of him, but sometimes I have to throw the science guys a bone."

"Right, right." Ward felt the pieces coming together like the first tickly breeze of a coming train. His mind churned for a moment, and then, click.

Dale Horowitz, editor of the *New York Times*. Christ, he should have known. Especially since she was precisely the kind of person he'd been looking for.

"The obit was lovely, Dale." **New York Philanthropist Dies at 69** had been accompanied by a picture of his wife when she was young, not even forty. Isabelle must have given it to them. He'd spent time that morning staring at the photo. By the looseness of the smile on her face, he guessed the picture had been taken before Isabelle's accident. She still looked like the girl he'd seen walk into a restaurant decades before, his Claire Cunningham. The write-up was brief, focused on the reading program Claire had started at Mount Sinai. It took two full sentences before it mentioned she was the wife of Ward Manning. Claire would have appreciated that. She also would have understood that even with her blue-blooded, Mayflower-sailing family, even with her successful non-profit, she got into the paper because of him.

"Glad you liked it," said Dale, before leaning in with the back of her hand shielding the side of her mouth and speaking in a mock whisper. "Don't worry. Yours is in the can."

"Excuse me?"

"Your obit. It's done. I drafted it myself."

Ward raised his eyebrows. Dale smiled and looked at him expectantly.

"I hate to nitpick, but there's the small matter of me being, well, how shall I put this?" Ward cleared his throat. "Not dead."

"Come on. We have to write the big ones in advance."

Ward considered this. He wouldn't want anyone slapping together two thousand words on him overnight. He shuddered to think of all that could be inadvertently left out. And yet, Dale's information was unwelcome.

"Not everyone gets the editor of the whole goddamn paper, Ward."

"Hm." Ward felt a surge of melancholy that he would not get to read his own obituary, which he very much hoped would include the phrase "greatest novelist of our time" with the absolute minimum number of modifiers.

"And unless someone drops a bomb, I'll try for A1 placement."

"You speak as if this is imminent."

"Can't promise above the fold," Dale continued, as if she hadn't heard him.

Ward snorted. "My fingers are crossed."

A low, insistent moan began emanating from Dale's black leather bag. Dale retrieved her phone. Eyes locked on her screen, she punched the buttons,

muttering before she looked up at Ward and said, “I gotta run. My condolences again.”

Alone, Ward stood motionless for a moment, dazed. He was considering walking upstairs to his office, where a nice, thick stack of mail awaited him. But then he saw them. A gaggle of students loitered in the entry, their eyes widening at the massive apartment. He had to give Claire credit for that. Nearly thirty years before, when they’d moved above Ninety-Sixth Street, people thought they were crazy. The duplex facing the park was now worth many times what they’d paid. Ward decided it would be savage of him not to greet his students personally. He walked toward them, ready to be adored.

Brian

The Manning apartment had emptied out at last. Ward had disappeared upstairs, and Isabelle and Brian were camped out in the kitchen polishing off a bottle of wine and a leftover platter of pigs in a blanket. Isabelle sat cross-legged atop the island, and Brian below her on one of the metal stools.

“So who was the woman in full equestrian gear?” he asked.

“Oh god. My cousin Trudie. Really like third cousin or something, but whatever. She’s completely insane, walks around Manhattan with a riding crop. Her parents were obsessed with birds and used to leave Trudie as a child for weeks at a time to go to the Galápagos. Trudie became unnaturally invested in horses.”

“As one does.”

“I’m telling you. My mother was the only one in the family who wasn’t crazy.”

“I can believe it.”

“They’re actually pretty good cold.” Isabelle held up a mini hot dog before dipping it in mustard.

“Yeah, not bad,” said Brian, though they were unsettlingly rubbery. They sat chewing, not saying anything. Brian intuited that Isabelle did not want to be asked how she was doing for the millionth time that day, even by him. She wanted to talk about anything but her mother dying.

“Oooh, is there cheese over there?”

Brian retrieved the platter from the counter by the stove, and brought over another of vegetables, too. This one looked barely touched. There were fuchsia heads of cauliflower, green tomatoes still attached to the umbilical vine, and something that might be called *Romanesco*. The carrots, mottled purple, the color of a three-day bruise, had a thick tuft of vestigial greens. Brian had grown up thinking carrots were the flavorless severed thumbs sold bagged in the grocery store, the ones that calloused and chafed in the refrigerator. He knew better now.

Brian watched Isabelle retrieve some takeout containers from a drawer. She wordlessly handed him a spoon, and they began emptying the platters into the Tupperware. He didn't pry about why Isabelle was hoarding prosciutto-wrapped figs, or offer to buy her dinner. She'd only laugh and tell him he had no money, while mussing his hair. She wasn't entirely wrong about the money. He was a public servant, if a glorified one. But he had some savings from the law firm he'd worked at before he became a U.S. attorney. And he could easily make more if he wanted. He could certainly afford dinner. True as they might be, when these arguments hit the air, they would turn defensive and sad. And he was acutely aware that few people would be permitted to witness Isabelle doing what she was doing, and that his inclusion in this private moment and others like it depended on his tact.

The Mannings and their money was a mystery Brian could not fully unravel. He'd grown up under the impression that people had as much money as they earned at their jobs. But with people like the Mannings, it was far more complicated. Ward was unquestionably a very rich man. In contrast, if the family jokes were to be believed, Claire's side of the family was nearly insolvent. And yet, Isabelle's maternal relatives lived in large—if crumbling—estates and possessed multiple sailboats. Isabelle's own financial situation was a tangle of contradictions. She owned a small one-bedroom on east Seventy-Fourth Street in a doorman building, and had beautiful things, clothing, furniture, art. But she was often strapped for cash, claiming she couldn't go out because she was broke, and he didn't get the sense she was being overly dramatic. She certainly couldn't be living on the articles she sold here and there as she worked on her novel. Brian didn't know how she got by. Perhaps leftover fancy cocktail appetizers were part of it. The only thing Isabelle reliably had in her refrigerator was a box of Triscuits. She preferred them chilled.

Brian stacked the takeout containers on top of one another, and then rinsed the platters and put them in the dishwasher. After a day spent loitering around Isabelle, offering inevitably meaningless expressions of comfort, it was a relief to have a task, a tangible way to be helpful. When everything had been packed up, Brian lifted the stack of containers and asked, “Do you want me to find a bag for these?”

“No, let’s put them in the refrigerator,” said Isabelle.

“Aren’t you taking them?”

“Tomorrow. I’m going to stay here tonight.”

“Oh.” Brian paused. “Are you sure? I could walk you home.”

“It’s okay.” Isabelle pressed the container of vegetables into his hands. “For you, Mr. Healthy.”

Brian nodded, realizing he’d been given his cue to leave. He’d been expecting the night to gently taper off with the twenty-minute walk down Madison. He felt the sting of disappointment that he would instead have to say goodbye here before the long subway ride to the financial district alone.

They walked into the foyer. Before that afternoon, Brian had not been inside these walls in years, a decade maybe, but being in this apartment, inhaling that crisp, warm laundry smell, it felt like 2002 again, Brian camped out at the Mannings’ during a school break. It was in the guest bedroom just down the hall that he had learned what high thread count sheets felt like as he listened to the hiss and rattle of prewar building heat. He was a regular at Thanksgiving, where turkey never appeared, but a high-power mix of literati, artists, and theater actors he’d almost heard of did. All of Ward’s friends were “very famous,” sometimes for things Brian didn’t know you could be famous for, like lyric poetry or glassblowing. It was a far cry from the Thanksgivings Brian had grown up with, a bunch of his extended family in Lands’ End turtlenecks tucking into marshmallowed sweet potatoes. Ward usually ignored him, or called him “Byron,” but Claire was different. She was warm, remembering what he liked to drink and asking after his parents by name. She made a point to roll her eyes across the table at Brian when Ward or one of his friends said something pompous, which happened a lot. If there were teams, Claire had chosen Brian for hers. Claire had to know her daughter well enough to realize her obvious endorsement might not sway Isabelle’s affections in his favor. But Brian could never feel anything but gratitude toward Claire after

what she had done for him. Claire Manning had changed the course of Brian's life. He owed her a debt he would now never be able to repay.

. . .

Brian often considered how differently everything could have gone if he hadn't met Isabelle one of his first days at Brown. His new roommate Beckett, a sardonic, backward cap-wearing, rap-lyric-reciting graduate of an all-boys prep school, brought Brian to a party in an upperclassmen suite. It was there that Isabelle was nestled into a beanbag chair, passing a joint back and forth with another girl. Her bare legs were crossed, the top one swinging gamely. Her long blond hair was parted to the side, curtaining her forehead sexily. He would later learn that the style was purposeful, the way she hid her scar, faint and white, but still visible. But in that moment, he couldn't imagine Isabelle having a single flaw. Brian only knew that there were no girls like this in Minnesota.

Because he had played football in high school, because he was written about in the town newspaper when he got into Brown, because he had dimples and a six-pack, and because he didn't yet understand that he was from the wrong place, with the wrong parents, and ate the wrong kind of carrots, Brian approached her. He couldn't remember what they talked about. But he did remember what Beckett said afterward.

"Dude. That was *Isabelle Manning*."

"So?"

"So? Her dad's like super famous. Ward Manning?"

"Who's that?"

Beckett doubled over in laughter, mock spitting out his Pabst Blue Ribbon. "Ah, I love it, dude." He patted Brian on the shoulder as if consoling him from major embarrassment. Beckett then explained who Ward was, and that Beckett knew Isabelle "from the city." Brian came to understand this was a euphemism for a rarified sect of Manhattan society, those whose lives had been woven together since infancy with the sturdy threads of common privilege: music lessons at Diller-Quaile; summers on Lily Pond Lane, Putney France, Tennis Europe; schooling at Chapin, Brearley, Collegiate, Trinity, before matriculating at Harvard, Princeton, Brown, Yale, Duke. To these people, "the beach" meant the Hamptons, and "Florida" meant Palm Beach. It was a world Brian had not known existed until Brown, but he decoded it slowly, layer by