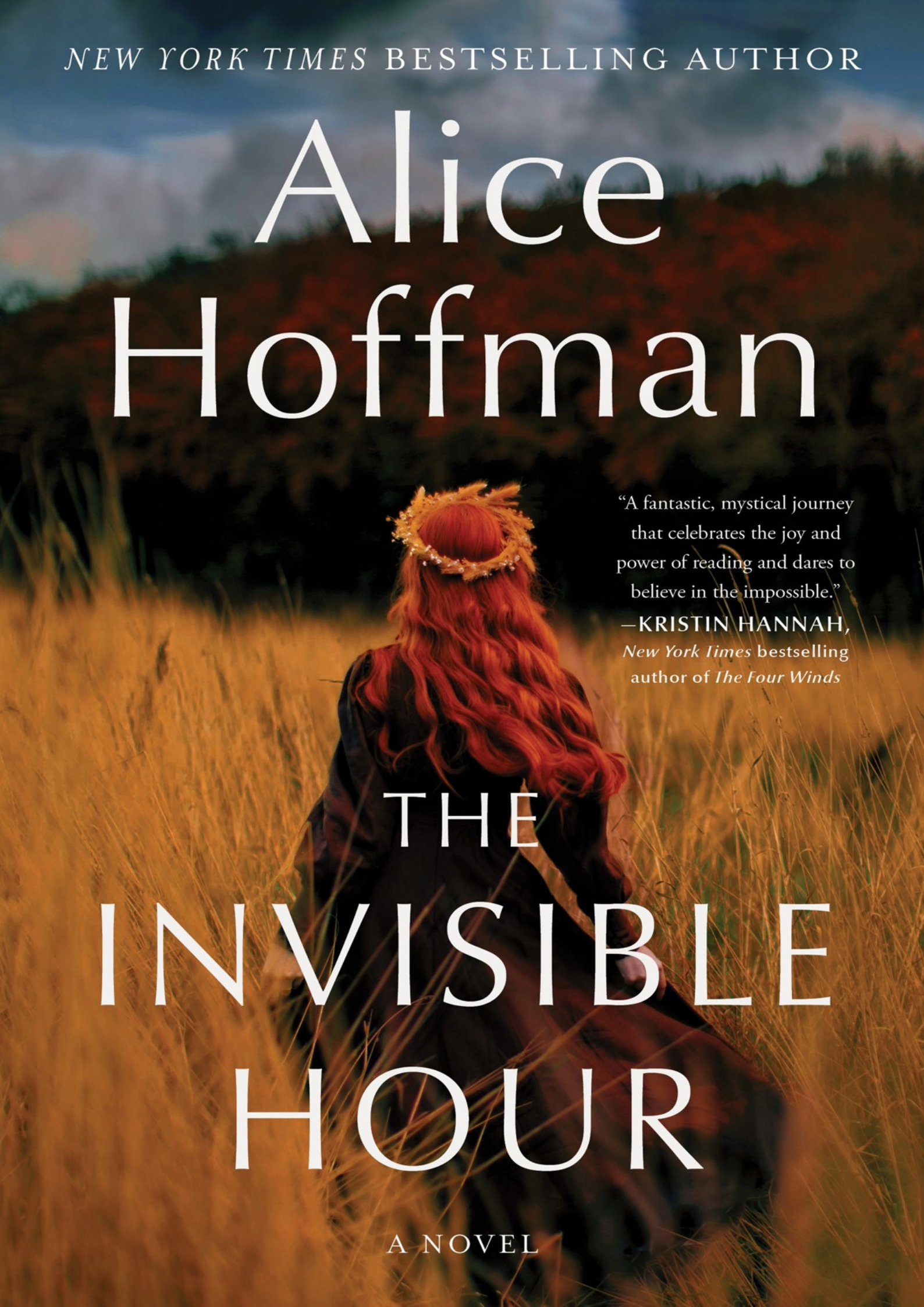


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# Alice Hoffman

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INVISIBLE  
HOUR

A NOVEL

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A L I C E  
H O F F M A N

**ATRIA BOOKS**

NEW YORK   LONDON   TORONTO   SYDNEY   NEW DELHI

*I began my life for the second time on a June night in the year I turned fifteen. My name was still Mia Jacob, and I was still made of blood and bones, but when I stepped into the road on that night I walked into a different future. I left the way my mother had arrived, alone and in the dark.*

*The moon was yellow and the woods were pitch black. If you didn't know there were mountains and fields and that this was Western Massachusetts, you would think you had come to the end of the earth. In some ways that was true, at least for me. I could feel every breath that I took rattle inside my chest. Every heartbeat echoed. Freedom is not what you think it is. It's cold and hard and bright. That was what it felt like to change everything. To pick up the ashes and let them blow in the wind.*

*In the morning I was to be punished out in the cow field, in front of everyone, a cautionary tale so that one and all could see what happened to anyone who disobeyed. I was meant to beg and plead. I had asked to be forgiven in the past, but I was someone else now. I was the girl who knew how to escape, the one who could become invisible, who believed that a single dream was more powerful than a thousand realities.*

*They thought I only had a life that I lived here, but I had found other possibilities every time I read a book.*

*They locked me in the barn with the sheep. They told me I should think about what tomorrow would bring. But I had stolen a hammer from the men rebuilding a shed in the farthest field, and I'd left it underneath the hay in the barn. I'd always thought I might need to escape.*

*I worked on the lock for an hour or more, until my hands were blistering and bleeding. Nothing, and then, all at once, the lock came apart in my hands.*

*I was wearing gray overalls and my mother's red boots. I looked like a prisoner, and that was what I'd always believed I was, but not anymore. My long red hair had been cut as a punishment in the spring, when I would not leave my mother's grave site and had to be torn away, the ferns I'd held on to still in my hands. My hair was too beautiful anyway, that's what they said, nothing more than a vanity, the sort of attribute that would make me look in a mirror and think I was better than everyone else.*

*This time, the punishment was worse. They had hung a rope around my neck on which there was a badge announcing the rules I had broken. *A* for acts of wickedness. *A* for affront and for anarchy. *A* for avoidance and antisocial behavior. *A* for ambition. Tomorrow they would burn the letter *A* into my arm so I would never forget the reason for my punishment.*

*They had found books in my possession. Shakespeare's collected plays. The Blue Book of Fairy Tales, which had been my mother's favorite when she was a girl. Emily Dickinson's letters and poems. *I am out with lanterns, looking for myself.* Every time I had gone to town, I'd managed to sneak into the library. I knew there was magic there, and I knew they would do their best to destroy it. They'd burned my books tonight and I could still smell the sulfury scent of embers out in the field where they planned to punish me tomorrow. I had one more book, the one I loved best of all, hidden in the barn in a place where they'd failed to look. It was my treasure and my map. It was the book that had saved my life. Long ago, there had been other places where women were punished for being true to themselves. I kept *The Scarlet Letter* close to my heart when I left the barn and ran across the dark*

field. Sometimes when you read a book it's as if you were reading the story of your own life. That was what had happened to me. I woke up when I read the first page. I saw who I was and who I could be.

The only other thing I took with me was a tiny painting I had found in a cabinet in the office. Take it, Evangeline who ran the office and the school had said when she saw what I'd found. No one wants that junk. It was a watercolor in shades of blue and green that I'd kept beneath my pillow. I looked at it every night and it always reminded me that the world was beautiful. It was beautiful even in the dark, with the soft green air all around me, and the fireflies drifting through the tall grass, and the white phlox growing wild in the woods.

The dogs all knew me, and they didn't stop me when I got to the gate; they didn't even bark. There were bats flickering through the trees. There were so many stars, but I didn't have time to look at them. I walked among the crowded thorns. I stood too close and bled. My mother didn't know how to unlock what kept us here, but I was different. I had the key in my hands, the book that was first published in 1850, the one that understood our story better than anyone who had ever known us. I left the badge that had been strung around my neck behind, making certain to tear it in two.

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I went through the fields, then down the dirt road and past the old oak trees. In the distance there was Hightop Mountain, where bears still roamed. I knew what I had to do. Travel light. Don't look back. Take only what you need most of all. I slipped into the forest and headed toward town. I had been born here and had lived here all my life, but that was over now. I would remain invisible among the ferns and the pine trees, unseen by any passing traffic. Twigs and leaves crunched under my boots as I made my way through the dense greenery where the evergreens gave off a dark, earthy scent. It was the end of something and the beginning of something.

*In every fairy tale the girl who is saved is the one who rescues herself.*

When I came to town, I ran down the road. I ran faster than I ever had before. I went to the one place where I knew the door would be open. The place where I'd found the key. Long before the sun came up, before they went to the barn and found I was gone, before they began to search for me, I was at the library. That was when my life began.



PART ONE  
THE HERE AND NOW





CHAPTER ONE  
ACROSS THE UNIVERSE

Ivy Jacob came from Boston, and had lived her whole life on Beacon Hill, but whenever she was asked where she grew up, she would say, *West of the moon*. She laughed when she gave out that fairy-tale locale that had never existed in this world or any other, but anyone could tell from the look in her eyes how deeply she wished it were true. She had always felt like an outsider in Louisburg Square, an exclusive enclave of Greek Revival houses surrounding a small park and garden, all privately owned by the elite families in the city. Neighbors didn't necessarily speak to each other, but they respected one another, and they followed the rules. The other girls on the hill wore pleated skirts and blouses with Peter Pan collars, they did as they were told, and when they graduated from the Birch School, they went to Wellesley or Mount Holyoke. Ivy was different. She did as she pleased. Her parents didn't appreciate the way she sulked, or how she shamed herself with her short skirts, treating her beauty as if it were a curse, chopping off her hair one year and dying it blue another, storming out of the room whenever her parents tried to talk sense into her. All the same, she was an intelligent girl, and had always been a great reader, spending hours at the Boston Athenaeum; but despite her love of books, she ignored her schoolwork and was failing her classes, bored to death by her lessons. She loved Thoreau for his rebellious thoughts, and the Brontës for their dark and tragic tales of love, and Toni Morrison, whose novels made her cry and feel as if she didn't know the first thing about life.

What few treasures she had were stored in a small jewelry box she'd been given when she was a child. When the lid was opened, a dancer spun in a circle. Inside there were little more than trinkets, silver bangle bracelets, a ticket stub from a concert she'd gone to when her parents were away vacationing, the key to their maid Helen Connelly's house. Helen, who'd never had children and always regretted that decision, saw the family close-up, and she knew how unhappy Ivy was. She'd been with the Jacob family ever since Ivy was a toddler and thought of the girl as her own, even though she wasn't. If she had been, Ivy would have been pulled out of that private school, where she was so clearly failing; she'd know she was loved.

"For emergencies," Helen had said when she gave Ivy the key. "If you ever need me."

Ivy had thrown her arms around Helen to thank her. "Every day is an emergency," Ivy had whispered, and although she had smiled, it didn't feel like a joke.

"Don't forget," Helen had told the girl. "Day or night. I'm here."

Ivy was a true beauty, with black hair and gray eyes, but as she grew older, she became more unmanageable, at least in her parents' opinion. By the time she was sixteen her mother considered Ivy to be the bane of her existence. When she was a senior in high school, her grades were abysmal, she often slept past noon, and she'd become a vegetarian, a choice her parents were convinced she had made out of spite. Ivy had been picked up by police with a group that had vandalized the statue of John Harvard in Harvard Yard, painting his foot red. There had been one boy after another, and Ivy had recently been caught in her room in bed with a neighbor's son, a Harvard student named Noah Brinley, who was from a perfectly fine family; still, their actions were unacceptable. Noah's parents were not informed of the situation—boys would be boys after all—but Ivy was grounded for several weeks, although if her parents had been more observant, they would have seen damp footprints on the carpeting in the hall, left there on the cold mornings when

Ivy sneaked back into the house after nights spent in the Public Garden, or in Noah's dorm room, or wandering home along Beacon Street.

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IVY DIDN'T REALIZE WHAT had happened until September, and by then three months had passed. She'd skipped her time of the month before, but one day she felt something move inside her. No one had discussed birth control with her, and she'd thought she could depend on Noah to take care of that, but he'd never been one to take responsibility. Now it was as if she had swallowed the sea, and there was a wave coursing through her, a quickening that felt as if another heart was beating against her own. Ivy had never thought about having a baby, children were of no interest to her, but now what was important in the world had changed.

Students were just returning to Harvard, and she found Noah in his dorm room, unpacking. He'd been away all summer, traveling with his parents in France, and somehow, he had not connected with Ivy after his return to the States. The truth was, there were other girls he found more interesting, ones who didn't have so much baggage and were more sophisticated in sexual matters. Noah was tall and handsome with thick red-blond hair. "Hey," he said uncertainly when he saw her in the doorway. Ivy looked heavier, and she had a strange, dreamy expression, almost as if she was in a trance. "What are you doing here?" Noah asked after a measured pause.

She was there to tell him that their lives were about to change, that they were meant to be together, that joy would be theirs, but when she announced that she was pregnant, Noah had no response. He appeared blank and fuzzy-headed, the way he did when he'd had too much to drink. Ivy told him she wanted them to run away together, and in response Noah slammed the door shut in case his roommate returned. "Lower your voice," he said, and at that moment, there in his Harvard dorm room, he sounded like Ivy's father.

Ivy had thought they were in love, that's what they had told each other, but now she saw the dark, sidelong look Noah gave her and she thought that she might have been wrong. She'd seen that look before, from her father as a matter of fact. Disappointment and distance. Noah was still in the room with her, but it was as if he'd already left.

"Do you think I would actually consider running away?" Noah said coldly, a scowl on his handsome face. "This is my sophomore year. This year matters. Don't screw it up for me."

Ivy felt like a little girl, abandoned to a world of chaos. The truth was, for all of her bad-girl attitude, Noah was the first boy she'd been intimate with. She couldn't go to her family doctor for help with birth control, he would have immediately told her mother, and the one time she'd gone to a clinic for help, there were protesters outside, and she'd been too nervous to walk past them. "I thought you wanted us to be together."

Noah depended on the goodwill of his parents, and this news of Ivy's would infuriate them. Who knew what price he'd have to pay? He would have never gotten into Harvard without his father's interference. "People change," he said with confident authority. He'd heard his father say so many times before.

Noah wasn't even certain how he felt about Ivy anymore. What did love mean, anyway? Ivy was beautiful, but what had made for amusing fun at the start—jumping into the Charles River, even though it was polluted and freezing, stealing from shops on Charles Street, having sex late at night in the Boston Public Garden—seemed childish to him now. Ivy could get rid of the baby or have it, that was her decision. What did he have to do with it?

“Hey,” Noah told her. “What can I say? Do as you please.”

“As I please?” Ivy was incredulous. “Isn’t that what you’re doing? Whatever *you* please?”

Noah took a step back. Ivy’s gray eyes were like a cat’s. You never knew what a girl like Ivy might do. She was so emotional. You never knew when she’d snap. She might ring up his parents or arrive at their front door, pleading for help. She might blackmail him or stalk him, lurking behind him in Harvard Yard, attempting to ambush him. He had his future to think of, and Ivy was already a part of his past. He would likely have difficulty remembering her in years to come.

“Look, I have a class,” Noah said crossly, having no idea that he was behaving badly and not much caring. “Not everyone has all the time in the world.”

Noah stalked away, resigned to the fact that not all liaisons ended well. Ivy wasn’t the first girl he’d disappointed, and she likely wouldn’t be the last. He had wanted to say, *It’s your problem, not mine*, but it was easier to just disappear. Once he turned the corner, Ivy was already forgotten.

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SHE WAITED A WEEK, but waiting didn’t make anything easier. Her dreams woke her in the middle of the night. Her clothes didn’t fit her anymore. When she finally told her father about her situation, he slapped her, a gut response he forever regretted.

He wasn’t ordinarily a violent man, but what was done was done and now Ivy stared at him as if he were a stranger. “What were you thinking?” he spat, agitated. He asked Ivy if she was trying to kill her mother, ruin his business, throw her life away.

“I’m having a baby,” Ivy told him. “I thought you would help me.”

She was sent to her room as if she were a child, and she heard her parents arguing down in the parlor. She sneaked out of her bedroom and perched on the stairs to hear what the adults were plotting. They had already decided her fate. Ivy would be sent to a school in Utah, a facility they referred to as a lockdown, and when the baby was born it would be placed for adoption. It was her body and her future they were discussing, but it seemed that it belonged to them, and they intended to take control of what they considered to be a disaster.

Ivy packed a suitcase and waited for them to go to bed, then she went down the three flights to the front door. She might have left a note for Helen, who had always been so kind to her, she might have taken the key from her jewelry box and ridden the T to South Boston, where Helen lived, but she wasn’t thinking straight. Her impulse was to get away as fast as she could so that her parents couldn’t rule her life. She would most certainly not allow them to take her baby. She didn’t care that the front door was still propped open when she left. Her parents’ belongings meant everything to them, and they were always careful to double-lock the front door. Let them see what it was like to have someone who didn’t respect their desires or dreams. Let them know that she didn’t intend to come back.

Ivy was shivering once she realized that her fate was in her own hands. All the same, she went to Harvard Square and sat cross-legged on the bricks near the T station, where young people gathered to hang out and buy drugs. Her back was against the wall, her suitcase stowed under her legs. Her long black hair hung loose down her back, and she was wearing jeans and a jacket that she now realized was too light for the season. It was chilly on September nights. Time was passing so quickly.

Ivy was hoping to spy Noah, yearning for him to change his mind, but he wasn’t there, and if he had seen her there in the Square, he would have walked right past her. He’d already planned that

should their paths ever cross again, he would not engage at any level, not even a conversation. He owed her nothing, after all. He'd simply avert his eyes and wish her away. He'd already done that as a matter of fact.

A girl with a heavy backpack sat down next to Ivy. "Hey, how are you doing?"

"How do you think?" Ivy was embarrassed when she realized there were tears in her eyes.

"I think the world can be cruel," the girl said.

Ivy wiped her tears away. What good would crying do? "Somebody must be happy somewhere," she muttered, although she didn't quite believe it.

"They are," the girl said. "And I know where."

Ivy's new companion was Kayla, or at least that was what she called herself now; she used to have another name, the one her parents had given her, but that didn't matter anymore. Kayla was on her way to Western Massachusetts. She'd heard about a community where people were respected for who they were and not expected to be who their families wanted them to be. They weren't judged and they shared all they had. She'd come to Harvard Square to panhandle and get enough cash together for the bus ticket.

As it turned out there was no need for begging. Ivy had her dad's credit card, and because her father had not yet canceled it, the girls went out and charged plates of fries at Charlie's Kitchen, then they each bought new shoes. After that, they went downtown, and Ivy used her father's card to withdraw enough cash for two bus tickets before tossing the American Express card in a trash bin at the Greyhound Bus Station. There in the station, Ivy froze for a minute. She knew everything was about to change.

"Don't be scared," Kayla said.

Ivy was shivering. The life she'd had seemed very far away, and she already regretted not calling Helen. "I'm not scared," she insisted.

"We'll find the place that will welcome us," Kayla assured her.

Ivy was exhausted and she was grateful to fall asleep on the bus, where it was warm and cozy and dark. When she woke up three hours later in Blackwell, Massachusetts, she looked out the window and saw the night sky swirling with stars and she thought it might be possible that she had stumbled into paradise.

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KENNETH JACOB CAME DOWN the staircase at a little past six in the morning, and he knew something was amiss. He got the message his daughter had sent when she left the door unlocked. It had blown wide open, and there were two pigeons doddering about on the black-and-white marble tiled floor. Ivy had disappeared so completely it was as if she had been swallowed whole by the earth. The private detective Ken hired couldn't find her until ten months later, when she was living out in rural Massachusetts, past Blackwell on some run-down farm where she'd already given birth to a baby girl. The detective brought the photographs he'd snapped to Ivy's father's office on Beacon Street. Kenneth Jacob sifted through them as the detective explained that Ivy had fallen in with a cultish community run by a crackpot whose rules included a code that compelled members to sever all ties with their families of origin, completely cutting off contact. As it turned out, the Jacob family had long ago lived in the Berkshires and their direct relatives had made their fortune in the apple orchards outside Blackwell before turning to real estate and banking in Boston. One of their

ancestors was said to have had a child with John Chapman, the man known as Johnny Appleseed, so Ken Jacob liked to say that apples ran in their blood.

In the grainy photos the detective had taken, Ivy's hair was braided and covered with a scarf, and her beautiful face was serene as she picked what appeared to be blackberries. She wore a threadbare man's jacket and carried a wicker basket. There was a baby on a blanket, left to its own devices as Ivy concentrated on the low-growing fruit. The sunshine was bright, and, in the distance, there was a forest of dark pine trees. Nearby was an orchard, and if Ken had known anything about apples, he would have seen they were a variety called Look-No-Further, descendants of the ones Johnny Appleseed had planted.

"Is she with the high school boyfriend?" Ken Jacob asked. He'd been tormented ever since Ivy disappeared; he'd always assumed he could right whatever went wrong and he had assured his wife he would do so again, but he'd begun to have doubts.

"Noah Brinley? Nope. No way. He's at Harvard. She's with this Joel Davis character. The one that runs the Community. He says he studied at Harvard, but the only records I found for him were over at the Massachusetts Department of Corrections. He did time at Bay State Correctional Center, there on assault charges."

"Well, she won't be with him for long." Ken Jacob had had just about enough. This was no longer teenage high jinks; it was the total ruination of a life.

"Ken," the detective said. He was an affable guy who had seen terrible things in his line of work. He only used a client's first name when delivering bad news. "She married him."

Ken Jacob nodded. "Okay," he said. He sounded calm, but the truth was, he was in a panic. He'd been trained to always think of a backup plan in his investment career and as a boy had learned not to allow his feelings to show by his mother and his nanny. Ivy had turned eighteen, but there were ways around things. "Can we get the child?" He had been so convinced the baby should be placed for adoption when he first learned Ivy was pregnant, but now he believed they could undo some of the damage. They'd have a granddaughter. One perfect child. They'd protect her and take care of her. He didn't dare think, the way they hadn't protected Ivy.

"Unlikely," the detective said bluntly. "Davis is listed on the birth certificate as the father. So, we'd have a fight, and it wouldn't be pretty. From what I've heard, he's a son of a bitch."

A fight meant articles in the *Boston Globe*. It meant lawyers and courthouses. Ken wasn't certain his wife could take going through that sort of battle.

"We could snatch the child," Ken said. A gang of men could swoop down in the middle of the night; they could leave a truck idling outside the Community's gates.

"If you want to acquire the child, I have the guys for it. It would cost thirty grand. But there's always the risk that something could go wrong," the detective informed Ken. "You're spending money, but you have no guarantees."

It wasn't the money that bothered Ken Jacob, it was the idea of leaving his wife on her own if he were to be caught and sentenced. And so, tormented by all he could not do, he wedged the photographs he'd been given into the top drawer of his desk. He paid for the detective's services, and he never mentioned his daughter's whereabouts to his wife, even though he heard Catherine crying late at night. He thought the truth of what had happened to their girl was worse than most of the things Catherine could imagine. He couldn't bear for his wife to see the photographs of their brilliant little girl dressed in austere gray clothing, as if she were a Puritan. Ken used to go skiing and snowshoeing in that vicinity when he was a young man, stopping at the rustic Jack Straw

Tavern; he'd gone to see what local people call the Tree of Life, planted by Johnny Appleseed himself on his way out west. One winter he discovered that the folklore about the tree was true, it really did bloom in winter. It was a wonder and a marvel, one that could make a person believe in magic, at least for a time.

He couldn't help but wonder if Ivy had even thought about them. He wondered if she'd known that after she left, he sat by the front door most nights, waiting for her to come home. Well, now he knew, she wouldn't be returning. She was married and she wasn't their girl anymore. There was no need for Catherine to be told anything. It wouldn't have mattered, anyway. Some things that had been done could not be undone, and Ken Jacob was convinced that their daughter was a lost soul. If he had gotten into his car and driven three hours, Ivy might have run to him with the baby in her arms, grateful beyond measure. She might have cried and told him she'd made a mistake. She might have forgiven him for slapping her and refusing to help her when it mattered most. They could have forgiven each other, and the future could have been something they shared, but instead Ken Jacob went into his study, and he locked the door, and he never said her name aloud again.

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WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS HAD ONCE been wilderness, and there were times when it still appeared to be a wild land, especially in January, when the snow was so high it was impossible to walk down the road, or in October, when the mountains were ablaze, as if the whole world had caught fire. The Community owned two hundred acres of land just outside the town of Blackwell, which had been founded in 1750. Residents of Blackwell had been unhappy when a trickle of strangers began to appear ten years earlier. The first group pitched their tents not far from the edge of Band's Meadow, they bathed in the Last Look River, and ate fiddlehead ferns and corn meant for livestock. They were a ragtag bunch, and all newcomers were greeted with love and kindness, even though many owned nothing more than a backpack slung over one shoulder and had arrived in town straight off the Greyhound bus. Others had left established lives to become searchers for beauty or truth, often arriving in BMWs or Audis, which were soon enough sold off at the Car Mart near the highway to Lenox, since possessions were not valued among the group and personal wealth was shared.

The Community's first bleak winter was spent in a pure sort of poverty with months of backbreaking work that left dark circles under the recruits' eyes. Before long, fifteen small houses had been built, and then the Community Center and the dining hall went up, and finally the dormitories for the children, with their white iron beds and neat cubbies for shoes and clothes. The barns were all raised in a single day by forty men, most of whom knew nothing about farming and so little about building that several accidents occurred that afternoon, including a broken leg and a nail rammed through the palm of a young man's hand.

After ten years, the locals had to admit the Community people worked hard, and when the mayor had sent the entire police force of Blackwell, three men and a lone woman, out to the farm to search for evidence of criminal activity, they found none. The town had no choice but to accept the likelihood that the Community was there to stay, whether or not they agreed with Joel Davis's philosophy. Davis was thought to be cunning and shrewd, but even those who were dead set against the Community found themselves being won over, at least a little, when they came face-to-face with Davis at the hardware store, or at town meetings, which he attended to make certain his

land was not encroached upon. He was handsome, with dark hair and even darker eyes, but it was more than his good looks that were so appealing; it was when he spoke to you it seemed as if you were the only person in the room. He was focused and intense. *Can I be honest with you?* he often said in that deep voice of his, which made you stop and listen and give him a chance, even if you were opposed to the whole concept of what he was doing out there on the farm. He had those impenetrable, watchful eyes and many of the local women looked at him in a way that made their husbands uncomfortable when he spoke up against pesticides or new road construction at town meetings.

Joel proclaimed that every individual had to free himself from the sins of his ancestors, and that the only cure for the damage birth families caused to the psyche was to escape traditional relationships and form a new sort of family. Children did not live with their parents or attend public school. The women were obliged to appear plain, no matter how good-looking they might be, with their hair in braids, outfitted with work boots and jackets that didn't seem quite warm enough in winter. *You should be judged by what is inside you, not on how you look*, Joel always proclaimed. *You are starting anew. You are leaving one world for the goodness of another.*

The men in the Community were earnest and somewhat glum, bursting with brittle new muscles arising from their labor, their heads often shaved as penance for one misdeed or another. As for the children, they were raised to respect their elders and were reticent to speak unless spoken to. They were schooled at the farm, helping to raise the sheep and tending the vast vegetable garden. *What we take from the earth, we must return*, Joel told those solemn little beings, who gathered around him as he taught them not only how to weed and to hoe but how to be responsible people. Although he was evasive about his own past, his lessons were the only ones that mattered. *Love is at the heart of everything*, he told them. *Own nothing, covet nothing, and forget no wrongs.*

The acreage had been owned by Carrie Oldenfield Starr, deceased for more than ten years, a beautiful young woman from a local family who had used her inheritance to support the dream of her husband. Joel Davis had vowed to build a realm that would welcome all who were in need and were willing to work to create a better world. Carrie's family had never forgiven her for giving the land away to a stranger, and although many of the Starrs still resided in the Berkshires, not one had ever come to visit the small fenced-in cemetery that faced the mountain where Carrie had been buried. Some of the women at the Community believed that she was an angel who watched over them, but there were others who said they could hear her spirit crying when the wind came up, and they covered their ears and turned away and hoped they were wrong to have doubts. To stay here a person had to accept Joel's philosophy wholeheartedly. He might have ambition, he might be ruthless when it came to getting what he wanted, but everyone else must resist the impulse to desire more. Life on the farm was austere and laden with rules that covered nearly every action and every hour of the day. Anyone who disobeyed was punished and all doubters were cast out. The rules were memorized and recited by the children twice a day, at dawn and at dusk.

*No acts of wickedness. No anarchy or antisocial behavior. No contact with original families. No contact with the outside world and their judgments. No reading novels or attending public school. No betrayals or disloyalty. No greed. No personal possessions. No vanity. No selfish behavior. No idle hands. No immorality. No terminating pregnancies.*

*Children belong to everyone. Love is everywhere. There is only one family, and it is us.*



If a person should break the rules, their shortcoming would be written on a chalkboard, left up for weeks. They would be made to wear placards strung around their necks with the first letters of their transgressions there for all to see. *S* for selfishness. *Q* for those who asked too many questions. *C* for those who coveted their neighbors' belongings. *J* for jealousy. *A* for anarchy and acts of wickedness.

For women who went directly against the principles of the Community, if they wore colorful clothes, for instance, or were found with a book among their possessions, the punishments would also include isolation and the letters branded onto the flesh of their upper arms. *You shall not be like Eve*, Davis told them tenderly, *and lead us to ruination*. Children and teens were whipped out in the field, a stroke for every rule broken. This was done out of love, Joel explained. If you were not taught, how could you be expected to know better? If you were not a student, how could you ever hope to teach your own children? Love was everything, he said, as a transgressor was locked in the barn without food or water. Love was all they had in the world that they were building, and it would remain when the world outside fell apart.

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JOEL NOTICED IVY ON the night she arrived. Usually he was unapproachable, and didn't bother with new arrivals, unless they were homeless men, which he had been himself before he changed his life, but this time his attention was riveted. Ivy and Kayla were brought into his office, where he was working late after they'd made their way to the farm by walking down Route 17 in the dark. Joel had raked his fingers through his black hair. He had a natural arrogance that irritated some people and drew others to him. Joel sat at his desk while Kayla went on about how her parents didn't understand her.

"That sounds like the story of everyone who comes here," he said dismissively.

He then turned to Ivy, who hadn't said a word. He looked at her as if she were the only person in the room and she could feel her heart jolt. At that moment Ivy felt as if he saw her, the real her, not the pretty rich girl, for he seemed to look more deeply. He saw the girl who had feelings and ideas and who was now so terribly lost. Joel didn't ask her any questions, instead he just pushed his chair back, then stood and came to embrace her. "You won't be hurt again," he said. "I promise you that."

Ivy leaned against Joel and wept and wished that Noah and her father had said that to her, but they hadn't.

"I'll take care of you," Joel said. He spoke softly, so no one else could hear.

Kayla was staring at Ivy, glassy-eyed and annoyed by all the attention she was receiving.

Ivy wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and nodded her gratitude. In the times to come, she would thank him a thousand times over and sometimes she would mean it, but more often she would not. She meant it on this night.

"If you stay here, I'll make certain you never regret it," Joel vowed.

"Great," Kayla said, even though Joel's eyes were on Ivy. "We're in."

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A WOMAN NAMED EVANGELINE led them to a house that several young women occupied. They would share a room. It was plain, but comfortable. The beds were all made with clean, fresh linens.

“He liked you,” Evangeline said to Ivy. Evangeline had been a college classmate of Joel’s first wife, Carrie, and had given up tenure at Tufts in the psychology department to come help Joel run the farm after Carrie’s death. She was married to Tim Hardy, who Joel had thought would be a good match for her. Tim had been a pastor in the army and had come to the Community when he was drug-addicted and homeless. Joel had offered him more than charity; he’d offered him a way of belonging. Tim still wore secondhand clothes, as if to remind himself of the time when he was hopeless and avoid getting a swelled head, even though he was now the foreman of the building crew. Evangeline was in charge of the children’s house and the office and just about everything in between. There were several married couples in the Community, but some were more respected than others, and Tim and Evangeline were closest to Joel.

“Joel’s been hurt before,” Evangeline told Ivy, for she’d seen the way Joel had looked at the girl and she knew what would likely come next. “He lost the love of his life to cancer. Don’t hurt him again.”

Ivy knew that he was focused on her all through the autumn as slashes of red and yellow appeared in the woods. She had felt his eyes on her as she raked heaps of fallen leaves or assisted with the children in the play yard. She noticed that the children were polite and well behaved; even the youngest ones weren’t allowed to run riot. Sometimes she felt like telling them to act up, to race through the fields, to climb trees or tell jokes, but she never did. Evangeline’s vigilant eyes were always on her.

Ivy’s favorite job was to work in the orchards, where she felt safe and hidden among the trees, preoccupied by the fairy tales she had always turned to for solace. Now, as the dark late autumn approached, she felt as if she were a character who’d been lost in the woods.

Joel had recently taken in several homeless people from Northampton to work and live on the farm, and now they were calling to each other in joyful voices even though it was drudgery to comb through the orchard for fruit. Ivy had seen them on the night they arrived, after they’d been brought to the dining hall. Joel had been the one to bring them their dinners, and then he had sat down with the new people as if he had known them all their lives. He had been so kind to them that Ivy’s heart had swelled up with an abiding devotion. Most people were intimidated by him, but he opened himself to these people who had nothing and welcomed them to the Community. He’d lifted his eyes to her, and when he did everyone else in the room had fallen away.

Ivy was four months along and showing now. It was a chilly morning, and she was out gathering fruit in a wicker basket. She knew her family had something to do with apples, and they had never been a favorite fruit of hers. She wore a scarf and gloves and a man’s peacoat. When she turned, Joel was standing there watching. She’d heard other women say it would be unwise to betray him or anger him; you had to earn his trust, and if you dared to break it, there was a price to pay. She had seen men and women wearing badges when they had gone against the rules. She was told they had lied or stolen, that they had been vain or disrespectful. Joel was an honest man and expected honesty in return. That’s what Evangeline always said.

“Wherever I look, I always see you,” Joel told her when they encountered one another in the orchard. “I see true beauty.”

Ivy felt so unattractive, her face was puffy, her body heavier than it had ever been, that she couldn’t help being flattered. “You must be seeing apple trees, not me.” Ivy laughed, flushed with embarrassment, but also with something more.

“You’re far more beautiful.” His eyes were so dark, almost black. “Some things are meant to be,” he told her.

“Like apples.” Ivy gave him a fleeting look. She felt out of her depth here. The basket was heavy in her hands, and she set it down in the grass, aware that he was watching her. For some reason her breath was shallow in her chest.

“Like us,” Joel responded. “I’d wondered if I could ever love someone again.”

When Joel came toward her, she didn’t step away. Ivy couldn’t imagine that he’d want someone like her, an insecure girl who hadn’t even finished high school, who didn’t know how to drive a car and was pregnant and didn’t know the first thing about being a mother. She couldn’t imagine that her life could be set right. He kissed her in a way she had never been kissed before. No wonder people did as he said and believed in him. He was stronger than most men; for one thing, he knew what he wanted, even though Ivy wondered how he could be so kind to someone who had arrived on a bus, owning nothing, with nothing to offer. When she told him so, he smiled and shook his head.

“You have everything I want,” he told her. “You are the apple, you are the tree, you are the orchard.”

He didn’t wait for what he wanted. Ivy was impressed by that after being with a college boy who expected everything to be handed to him. Two days after they’d met in the orchard, Joel went on his bended knee before her; it was old-fashioned, and another woman might have laughed at how serious he was, but as soon as he did, Ivy was his. Just like that, on an October day. She was a tree in the forest, she was the love of his life, she was so young she was unable to see the future, and on that day, she went forward, hoping for the best. All she knew was that she was the woman who walked through an orchard knowing that she was valued and loved, something she had unfortunately never felt before.

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THAT WAS THE WINTER when the snow fell for days and storms became blizzards, when the Lost River froze and turned blue, it was the winter of love when they walked through the drifts to an abandoned cabin at the edge of the woods so they could be alone. Ivy’s belly was huge; she was due that March. All the same, Joel swore that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and she nearly believed him. They were inside a snow globe, after all. They were in a world of their own. “What do you want more than anything?” Joel asked her.

“A daughter,” she said. “Your daughter,” she added when she saw that he looked crestfallen. She knew that she said things to please him, that in some corner of her soul there was a hidden self she never allowed to be seen. Nothing was perfect, but this was close. Nothing lasted forever, although Joel swore what was between them was for all eternity. The snow was deeper all the time, and the world Ivy had known was so far away. She might have been anywhere, but she was here, in his arms, only six miles from the nearest town, but so far away she might as well have been west of the moon.

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ON THE DAY MIA was born, there was a false spring. The lilacs bloomed all at once and the bees emerged from their hives, only to freeze when the cold, blue night fell. Petals turned black. Bees

were found on window ledges, having frozen as they tried their best to reach the warm rooms inside. The Tree of Life planted by Johnny Appleseed did not have a single leaf that year. Ivy knew nothing about childbirth, and she'd thought she might die during the worst of her labor. She asked the midwife to put her out of her misery, but they didn't use drugs of any sort. "I can't do this," Ivy had cried, but then Joel had leaned close to whisper in her ear. He didn't leave her for a minute. "You have to walk through hell to get to heaven," Joel told her. She listened to him and calmed down. In this way she was bound to him, no matter who she had been before. "Breathe," he had said and that was what she did. *Have faith in yourself*, she thought. *Have faith in him*.

When they handed Ivy her daughter, the heart of her heart, the true love of her life, all of the pain she'd experienced was immediately forgotten.

"Our girl," Joel said, and Ivy was grateful that the child would have a father, even though here at the Community, children were raised in the children's house, the babies cared for by the women who worked in the nursery. She called the baby Mia, for she'd read that the name meant mine, and no matter the rules, this child belonged to her. Ivy had seven days alone with her daughter before she had to bring her to the nursery. Seven days of love and patience and solitude and sweetness. A wash of love came over her whenever she held her daughter, but the time spun by, and then it was over. Ivy's heart broke when Evangeline took Mia from her arms. Ivy was still scheduled to feed her, and those were the most precious hours of her day. There was a rocking chair by the window in the nursery with a lovely view, but Ivy never looked outside. She held the world in her arms, and when her visit with Mia was over, Ivy stood outside the children's house crying.

Some women saw her and reported her, and she was summoned to Joel's office.

"You have to be an example," he told her. "You can't break the rules."

*Children belong to everyone.*

Another woman would have been punished, isolated, and kept from her baby, or, if she continued to break the rules, taken into the fields to be beaten, but Joel had Ivy come sit on his lap and he gently made her promise to accept that her child belonged to the Community. He reminded her that love was everywhere, and if Ivy ever felt like crying again when she left the children's house, she stopped herself, worried that someone might see her. It wasn't so hard not to show what you really felt if you practiced, if you closed your eyes and imagined that your daughter was with you even when she was somewhere else, if you let the wind rise all around you, if you only heard the songs of the sparrows in the forest, a place so dark it was easy to get lost even in broad daylight, even if your eyes were open.

Ivy wrote the letter ten days after Mia was born. Ten days was all it took for her to know she had made a mistake. She went to the office after hours, took a stamped envelope and a sheet of white paper, and sat down at Joel's desk. She had been assigned to working in the office, where she helped with bill payments. *I trust you*, Joel had told her when he handed her the key. Evangeline had looked on, displeased, and that was when Ivy realized that Evangeline wanted Joel for herself. *Take him*, Ivy wished she could say. *Take it all*.

She had been thinking about the letter all day, and it was now fully formed in her mind. For the first time she knew exactly what she wanted to say, whether or not she was allowed.

*Dear Helen,*

*Should my daughter ever come to you and wish to know what happened, please give her this letter. Maybe it's not too late for her to understand that she always belonged to me.*