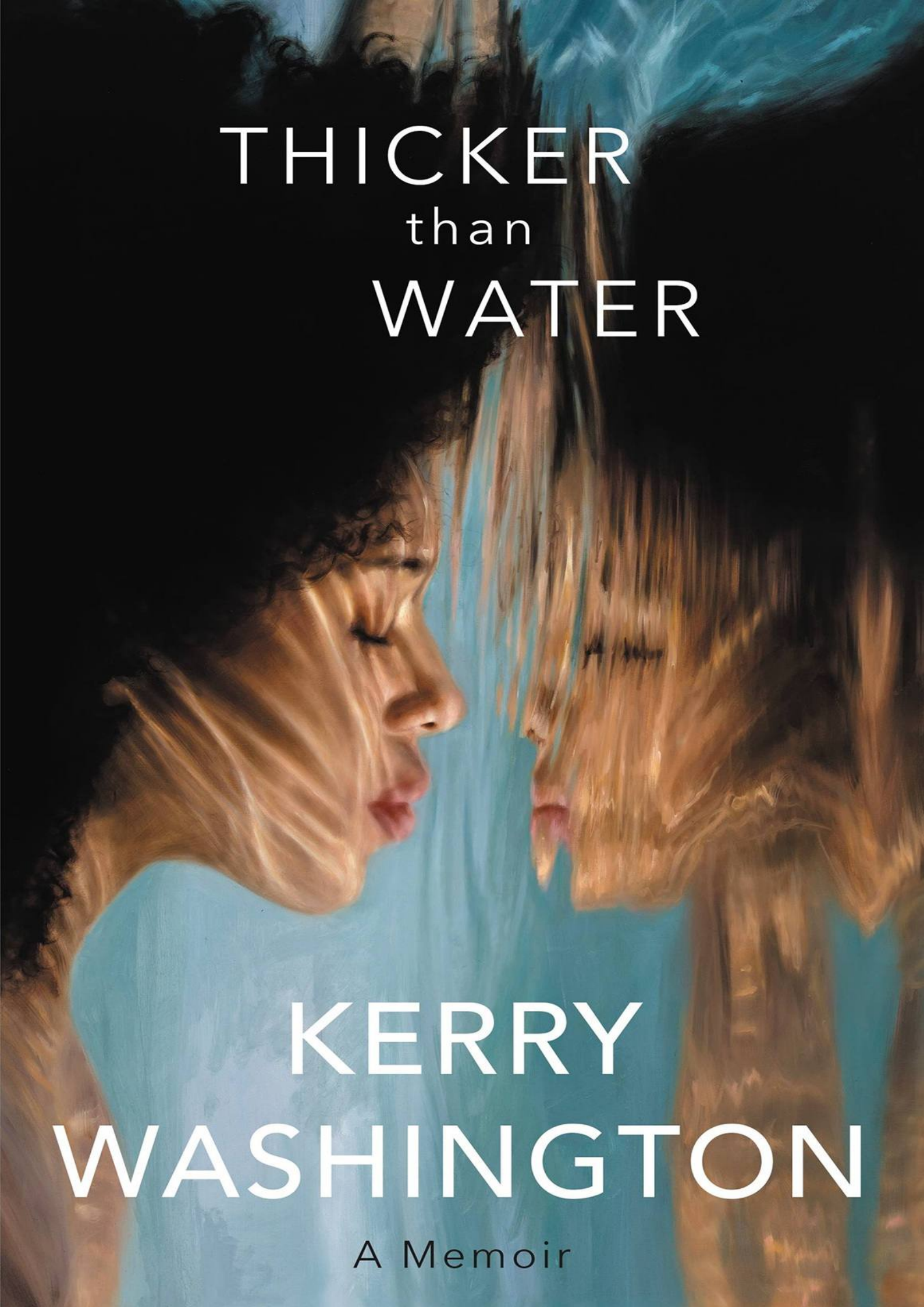
THICKER
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WATER
KERRY
WASHINGTON
A Memoir

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A Memoir

KERRY WASHINGTON

Little, Brown Spark
New York Boston London

The stories in this book reflect the author's recollection of events. Some names, locations, and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of those depicted. Dialogue has been re-created from memory.

Cover design by Mario J. Pulice
Cover painting by Reisha Perlmutter
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Little, Brown Spark
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
littlebrownspark.com
twitter.com/lbsparkbooks
facebook.com/littlebrownspark
Instagram.com/littlebrownspark

First ebook edition: September 2023

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ISBN 978-0-316-49737-4

E3-20230828-JV-NF-ORI

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To my personal superheroes:
Chitterlin’ Man and Hot Sauce;
Pump, Snacks, and Man-Man;
and to Babe

Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

Tap here to learn more.

This book is the result of my attempts to make sense of myself and my family and to accept the truth about who we are. I've written this account to more fully understand this truth, to affirm it, and to embrace it. This truth has given birth to a deeper compassion and love for my parents, and for myself. And I share it with you because I do not want to hide.

PROLOGUE

I got a text from my mother.

Where are you?

I quickly typed, **On my way home.**

I was sitting in my car at a stoplight at Coldwater Canyon and Ventura Boulevard in Sherman Oaks, just north of the city of Los Angeles.

Three rippling iPhone dots, then a reply:

We need to talk to you.

This was odd. Up to that point, my parents hadn't been people who dove headfirst into difficult conversations. The articulation of their "need" was striking. And the "we"—the presentation of themselves as a unified pair—was in some ways even more peculiar.

Today? I texted, wanting more details without asking the obvious question: *Why?*

Yes.

The day was Tuesday, April 3, 2018. To my right was a 76 gas station; to my left, a Ralphs supermarket. Behind me in the distance were my new offices at CBS Radford Studio Center, where my production company, Simpson Street (named after the street my mother grew up on in the Bronx), was developing a pilot episode of a new half-hour comedy (a show that would never see the light of day). It was a routine stop at a regular traffic intersection on a standard Southern California afternoon.

The morning had been productive, filled with meetings for our new pilot. There was a lot to accomplish before tape night: actors to be cast, contracts to sign, scripts to be refined, sets to be built. Being busy is one of the ways I create a sense of safety and control during times when I feel like there is none. This was one of those times. For many years leading up to this point I had been blessed with an acting job that was as close as an actor can get to stability and security. I was gifted with a lead role, *the* lead role, on a hit network television drama. In those years of steady employment, I had held the golden egg, but three weeks earlier, I'd finished filming my last-ever scenes on *Scandal*.

When we wrapped, it had felt like a revelatory gift in the truest sense. I had completed, in those seven seasons, a cycle of creative productivity that had changed not only my life, but the lives of hundreds of cast and crew members, and impacted millions of viewers around the world. It had been an exhilarating and exhausting ride. Aside from being a massive hit, it also had a profound cultural impact on several fronts. We were one of the first television productions to harness the burgeoning power of social media; we revolutionized the landscape of workplace fashion; we portrayed women as a central part of the democratic process; we were the first show to portray an abortion procedure on-screen; and we'd proved that a woman of color could lead a primetime network drama, something that hadn't been done in my lifetime.

But all that was behind me now. Today, I was filled with the pleasure of being busy. Our new TV show was something that could not possibly have been any more different from *Scandal*—a half-hour, multiple-camera situation comedy filmed in the Valley, on the other side of the Santa Monica Mountains, miles from the center of Hollywood, where *Scandal* had been born.

Before my mother's text arrived, as I sat in my car, my heart had been full of joyful possibilities. In the short term, I was heading home to meet up with family. My cousin John; his wife, Milly; and their three children were visiting from the East Coast to spend spring break with my husband and me and our three children. There were plans that afternoon for all of us to go to an interactive art exhibit called Candytopia.

In the longer term, a shift had occurred in my life. Now that the draining intensity of *Scandal* was over, I felt unmoored. I was heeding a deep call to adventure, one filled with a new set of unknowns.

I reread my mother's text. **We need to talk to you.**

What's wrong? What's happening? What do they need?

I began to tap into a mode of hypervigilance that had become one of my vital tools for survival. None of this was normal. We were not a family that made special time to "talk" unless something was wrong. Those conversations were few and far between. And when the accommodations to talk had been made, it was never good news.

When the light changed, I turned left to head up the canyon and called my husband, Nnamdi. I repeated the text exchange to him.

"That's so strange, right?"

"What do you think is going on?" he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but I can’t imagine it’s good. Maybe someone is sick? Maybe it’s something with the law?”

There had been tough conversations between my parents and me on both of those difficult subjects in the past, conversations that had led to them reluctantly revealing painful family secrets that they had kept from me in their effort to love and protect me as best they could. I couldn’t help but wonder if this was another chapter of truth waiting to unfold. It was impossible to know for sure, given the limited intelligence that had been conveyed in those texts. Somewhere in my psyche I already knew that it was not good news, but I had made up my mind to wade in.

“I’m going to head to the apartment,” I said to Nnamdi. At the next light I texted my mother the same and made the decision to head back east, toward whatever talk awaited me.

“The apartment” was a two-bedroom condo in a doorman building in West Hollywood. I’d bought it when Nnamdi and I were dating but not yet engaged. Before filming the pilot for *Scandal*, I had moved back to New York; but when the show was in full swing, it was clear that I was becoming a California resident, and I’d needed to find a more permanent place to live. We had not yet gotten to the point in our relationship where it felt right to buy a home together, so asserting my fierce independence, I resolved to secure a place of my own. Years later, once we were married and had moved into our house in the Hollywood Hills, the apartment became the perfect landing spot for when my New York–based parents came to visit for more extended periods of time, something they started to do after the arrival of our daughter, Isabelle.

It took about half an hour to reach the apartment, on winding roads through Coldwater Canyon and Mulholland and Laurel Canyon, roads that often intimidate drivers who are new to LA. But I learned to drive on roads like this, twisting and turning my way through summers in the Catskill Mountains in upstate New York, where, as a teenager, I learned the limits of my “fierce independence” when my rejection of my mother’s gentle directives caused me to sideswipe a parked car.

There had been no more text exchanges since I’d told my mom I was on my way. When I arrived at the apartment, I parked in the basement and pressed the button to call the elevator. So much change had unfolded while

living in this building, so much life had been lived there. Date nights, labor pains, birthdays, couture fittings, *Scandal* rehearsals, *Game of Thrones* watch parties, baby's first solid foods, and first steps. As I stepped onto the elevator, I wondered what new memories today's conversation would etch into my heart. The closer I traveled toward my parents, with each passing floor, the more clearly I felt the weight of their request to speak.

The elevator door rattled open on the ninth floor. And as I turned left to face the precipice, my heart began to race. Light seeped from under the large wooden doors, and I was struck by the cavernous silence on the other side of them. I took a deep breath, readying myself for whatever revelations awaited me, and knocked. My mother's footsteps approached with a steady pace along the hardwood floor. The dense sound of the lock sliding open echoed in the empty hallway.

She opened the door, looked at me, and smiled in her slightly distant way, but today there was an extra measure of sadness in her eyes. As she turned to walk ahead of me into the living room, I could see my dad, silhouetted by the bright sunlight that streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows at the back of the apartment.

We were all there, our family of three: Earl, Valerie, and Kerry. Father, mother, and only child. The Washingtons. But the room felt empty, somehow; incomplete. There wasn't a ton of furniture, just two armchairs and a couch. There had once been a large ottoman in the center of the room, but Nnamdi and I had recently taken it to our house to replace a dangerous, sharp-edged coffee table that had proved too difficult to babyproof for our toddler son. I looked around and thought that perhaps I should be taking better care of my parents, providing them with more elaborate comforts and décor.

"Hey guys," I said, casually, wanting to convey that I was ready and able to metabolize whatever it was that they "needed" to share with me.

I sat down in the armchair closest to the door, my back to the entryway. My mother sat across from me, and my dad folded himself into the corner of the couch, as far from me as possible. No one said anything.

I wanted to try to make this as easy for them as I could. I already knew that for the past few weeks, my dad had been having sleepless nights and panic attacks.

Neither of them could look at me. Or at each other.

"Hey guys," I said again, and then, attempting to open a pathway into the discussion, I offered, "So, what's going on?"

In the silence, I looked around, searching the room for clues. There were many things that I cherished about that apartment, but at the top of the list was the view. The balcony that sat behind my parents provided an extraordinary south-facing perspective of Los Angeles. On a clear day you could see from the skyscrapers of downtown all the way to the Pacific. But even seated as I was, in the blue armchair that cradled me, I could see, behind my mother, endless skies with whispery white clouds hanging daintily in the blue, waiting for our conversation to take flight.

My mother took a deep breath, looked down, then up at me, and then down again—at her hands this time. Then back to me.

And then she started to speak.

“Forty-three years ago, we were having a really hard time having a child.…”

Everything slowed. My body felt suddenly heavy. My eyes started to burn as a kind of haze crept across them. The sound of my own breathing almost drowned out my mother’s words, but, as if underwater, I strained my ears to listen, finally, to the truth.

CHAPTER ONE

UNITED

"What will you do instead?"

It was late on a February morning in 2018, at Sunset Gower Studios in Hollywood, California. I was standing on a bare wooden platform behind the wall of a fake Truman Balcony. And it was Bellamy Young who had just asked that question—or rather, her character, Mellie Grant.

Emotions were running high. This would be the last scene of *Scandal* that Bellamy and I would share after arcing through seven seasons of emotional complexity as our characters Olivia Pope and Mellie Grant journeyed from enemies to allies, and then to partners, and finally, to friends. And in real life, during that time, Bellamy and I had come to share a sense of sisterhood that neither of us could have predicted. In the earliest days of *Scandal,* Bellamy's character, Mellie, was only a small supporting role on the show. Bellamy was originally cast to be a "day player." Day players are actors who are cast in a role in which their work can be completed in one day. In our pilot episode (which took, in total, ten days to film), Bellamy had just three lines, one of which was simply to proclaim my character's nickname, "Liiiiiiiiiv!" as she welcomed me into a quiet corner of a pretend Camp David.

By the end of the first season of *Scandal,* it was clear that Bellamy Young was a force to be reckoned with, and her character was a vital element in the magic alchemy that made *Scandal* a success. By the end of the series, Bellamy and our team of writers, led by Shonda Rhimes, our brilliant showrunner and titan of film and television, had transformed her character from the betrayed wife of a cheating president into the sitting president of the United States herself and a central character on *Scandal*.

Today's conversation on the balcony would be the last scene Bellamy would ever film during the life of our show, and it would be the last scene our entire production crew ever shot on our version of the Truman

Balcony.

Not all our time working on the Truman Balcony had been fun. The scenes filmed there were some of our toughest and most time-consuming to complete. The entire exterior landscape outside the White House was created with advanced CGI technology, which meant that our construction of the balcony, and the platforms surrounding it, were enveloped in walls of blue screen that ran twenty feet high and one hundred and fifty feet wide. What replaced those blue screens in post-production were images called plates, which had been taken from the actual White House balcony. This had never been done before. Many shows and films had created what they imagined to be the view from that balcony, but *Scandal* had been able to film actual footage from the balcony and then use those images. This remarkable access had been possible because of Shonda's strong relationship with the Obamas, and permission to film these plates had been granted when she'd paid a visit to the residence.

Most times, when I stared out onto the blue screen, as I was doing that morning, I thought of my own time on the real Truman Balcony. Years before, following a photo shoot for a shared cover of *Glamour* magazine with Michelle Obama and Sarah Jessica Parker, the First Lady invited us for lunch just inside the balcony. At that lunch, in that secluded haven, we'd spent time reflecting on the loss of anonymity and privacy—neither mine nor Sarah's as dramatic as the First Lady's. And I witnessed Michelle Obama's reverence for this little patch of elevated outdoor space that allowed her some sense of freedom within her cloistered existence. Now, as I prepared to complete this final scene with Bellamy, I thought about all the amazing places that my political life—both real and imaginary—had taken me.

In the years leading up to this scene, the pretend balcony had witnessed Olivia Pope in love, in anger, in pain, in joy, wielding power, feeling powerless… but this was the end. After we finished this scene, the entire Truman Balcony set would be ripped apart and destroyed. And although I knew that this set, these characters, and these circumstances in the script were not real, I discovered so much about this moment that felt like truth.

I had memorized the scene and practiced its possible rhythms alone in my head—and out loud with an assistant in the hair and makeup trailer—but when I actually heard the final question come out of Bellamy's mouth, "What will you do instead?" my heart leapt. For seven seasons I'd given the character of Olivia Pope and the show, our audiences, and our cast and

crew, every available ounce of my soul. I had worked harder than I ever knew was possible and had sacrificed elements of my life that I had not been prepared for: my health, my privacy, any number of personal relationships.

Don't get me wrong: The rewards far outweighed the costs—my life and my career had been transformed. And I had been gifted with seemingly endless opportunities, responsibilities, commitments, and priorities. Which is partly why when I opened my mouth to answer the question, I was overwhelmed with joy and excitement, and I responded from the deepest truth of me. The words that had been scripted for Olivia Pope rose in me with the force of a thirty-foot wave.

"Whatever I want," I said.

And with that answer, both Olivia Pope and the actor playing her declared an approach to what felt like the beginnings of freedom. Olivia was no longer tethered by professional or personal obligations and expectations. And with *Scandal* coming to an end, neither was I. A weight was being lifted.

I had for my entire life felt an intense pressure to succeed, to get everything unendingly right. And of course, one of the things that I learned while playing Olivia Pope is that she did, too. But no more. I hoped we were both going to be free now. Released from the weight of what the world needed us to do and be.

We shot multiple takes that day—over and over I answered the line as it was written, "Whatever I want." It became almost a mantra, or a spell, or an intoxicating incantation. I was thrilled for Olivia Pope and for me. Together, we had done our work—we had made history and shifted the landscape of popular culture—and it was now time to be free.

At some point toward the end of the morning, we were in my close-up coverage. This is the moment when the camera is placed within its closest distance to the actor and uses the lens that captures the most intensely intimate view of them. I was delivering the line with all the joy that was surging through me. Our directing producer, Tom Verica, walked over to me. Tom is a brilliant director whose insights I always welcomed because the notes he gave usually led me toward my best performance of a scene.

"Hey," he whispered through his quiet smile, "can you try a version that is not quite as…" He took a careful breath and said, "*Happy*?"

And it hit me. Something was happening to Olivia Pope in that moment on that balcony. There was the obvious joy to feel and express about her

future, for sure, but Olivia Pope and I were also saying goodbye. I looked at Bellamy and saw that she had tears in her eyes. I was not surprised. Bellamy is someone whose intellectual and emotional intelligence far exceeds mine. She needed no directive to grapple with the emotional truth of this goodbye; she was fully processing it all. But for me, the depth of this moment required more unfolding.

As I sat out there on that balcony, a realization slowly washed over me. In choosing now to be and do whatever felt most right to her, Olivia was admitting that up until that point she had mostly lived through, and for, other people. Olivia had never wholly done what she wanted—it wasn't even clear that she'd ever known exactly what that was. Freed from her father, and from her life as a fixer, Olivia was finally able to discover the truth of who she was without those defining forces.

My breathing deepened. What had initially felt like joy began to morph into grief. Bellamy and I were saying goodbye—to the show, to our characters, to each other, to who we had been in the world for these past seven seasons, and to the dedication that had been required of us to do so. The future stood in contrast to the sacrifices of the past, both personal and professional. And as it was now Olivia's time to do whatever she wanted and to be her most authentic self, perhaps it was time for me to do the same.

So, I thought, *do I even know who that authentic self is? If I am no longer Olivia Pope, who am I?*

In these years, I had become Olivia Pope, but I had also become "Kerry Washington," the star of this historic network drama. In a matter of days, both of these roles would be slipping away, and I would be left standing at the threshold of a new adventure.

When my parents began to date in the late sixties, they were not strangers to each other. My mother, Valerie Patricia Moss, went to high school with and befriended a kind young woman from Brooklyn named Claudell Washington. Claudell was bright and sweet and funny—easy to be with. But in the context of their lives up until that age, these young women might as well have been from separate universes. They had been raised on opposite sides of New York City and they came from very different families and ethnic cultures, but in each other they found a sisterhood that

would last far longer than either could have imagined.

Both young women had been identified as “special and gifted” early in their schooling, and each had ventured beyond the boroughs of their births (my mother, the Bronx; Claudell, Brooklyn) to attend high school on the exciting and exotic island of Manhattan. Decades later I would be invited to make a similar pilgrimage from the Bronx to Manhattan, also in pursuit of a more challenging education.

Back in those days, though, each borough had been a world unto itself. So while they both attended Washington Irving High School, they had no exposure to each other’s place of origin. There were no visits to each other’s homes, no sleepovers, no shared family vacations.

What they *did* share were secrets and dreams and wishes, as well as the mundane realities of their family and personal lives. My mother worked as a home health aide and then later in the pet department at Macy’s in Herald Square, and was one of seven children; Claudell was discouraged from working at all, and was one of two. Claudell’s younger brother, Earl, was charming, brash, and cocky, and a bit of a track star in the competitive scene of high school athletics in New York City.

After graduation, my mother attended college on a beautiful campus in the Bronx that was then called Hunter Uptown and is today called Lehman College. Part of the City University of New York, Lehman College is also where, after many years of teaching in New York City Public Schools, my mother returned and began her career as a professor, eventually running the graduate program for elementary and early childhood education and both designing and implementing a groundbreaking program for teachers of color called the Teacher Opportunity Corps. It was while attending Hunter Uptown as a younger woman that my mother met her first husband, another student. The two soon married; however after a few tumultuous years, they divorced.

After the divorce, Claudell, with whom she had remained close, told my mother that she was attending a house party in the Bronx thrown by her cousin, Olive, who would later become my godmother. As the story goes, my dad—Claudell’s younger brother, Earl—arrived at the party with a date, but he spent the whole evening talking to my mother on the back porch of the house on 216th Street and Barnes Avenue in the North Bronx. Given that my dad had just returned from a trip to the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games, and my mother was headed to a vacation in that same city, there was lots to talk about.

My dad has attended three Olympic Games in his lifetime—the Games combine two of the things he loves most: sports and international culture. Earl's profile in high school athletics had led him to run for both the University of Pittsburgh and the US Army. He had been stationed in Germany, and it was there that his love for travel had been born. He spent all his free time adventuring through Europe, absorbing the various languages and cultures. That love had taken him to Mexico City, where he had witnessed Tommie Smith and John Carlos raise their fists on the podium to proclaim Black Power.

My parents' initial conversation lasted well into the wee hours of the morning, and my dad asked my mother what her plans were for the following afternoon, because he was going to the beach with some friends. He invited her to meet him, and they agreed to continue their conversation there.

The crew met up at Riis Beach in the Rockaways, on the southern tip of Queens. Having never seen a Black woman so fearlessly embrace the waves, my dad says that he fell in love with my mother the instant she dove into the ocean. It would be many more months before they started to date (neither remembers their first kiss), but my dad would later say that the image of my mother frolicking in the surf in a gorgeous two-piece was all the inspiration his heart required.

They swam together that day. And although they had known each other for over a decade—because of my mother's friendship with Claudell, they had often found themselves in the same room at the same time at the same weddings and christenings—in the water, in the frothy waves of the Atlantic on that afternoon, their shared existence as partners in life was born.

I think about that afternoon often, reflecting on what exactly it was about my mother's dive into the ocean that so entranced my dad. For sure it was her beauty—to this day, he tells me she looked incredible—but there was also something rebellious, courageous, adventurous, about that dive. Given the modern history of segregation in public pools, and the far-reaching history of trauma inflicted upon African Americans during the transatlantic slave trade, many of us carry a complicated and painful relationship with swimming in general, and swimming in the ocean in particular. What my dad saw that day was a woman willing to boldly break from convention. She was not like any other Black woman he had ever met, and, as he watched the stroke of her arms pull her through the water,

he realized instantly that she was determined to carve her own path.

My mother and her six siblings were born to Clifford Mancle and Isabelle, Jamaicans who, like many immigrants to this country, came through Ellis Island in 1927 and 1929, respectively. Unlike many European immigrants, though, what they found in the United States was a complicated obstacle course of not only class, but caste.

Mancle and Isabelle hailed from the Parish of St. Elizabeth in the southwest corner of Jamaica. Despite his country of origin and his mixed heritage, Mancle looked like a northern European immigrant—fair-skinned with angular features. He was an alcoholic, but a jovial one—if he won money playing the numbers, he was the "spent it all before I got home" kind of drinker. He died when my mother was fifteen, leaving her and her siblings in the sole care of their mother. Like her husband, Isabelle was also from a mixed background, but her features told a more obvious story of the African and Arawak heritage that ran in both of their bloodlines. And unlike her jovial husband, there was a seriousness about Isabelle, a sense that she had been through a lot, was carrying multiple burdens, and was to be respected.

Due to growing up as both mixed race and a first-generation American, in many ways my mother's identity was born of the complexity of being othered. She was not raised within the cultural mores of American Blackness; she was the child of immigrants, a Caribbean kid, and accordingly had more in common with the other Caribbean children in school. While a few of my mother's sisters presented as, and identified with, other ethnic communities who seemed more racially ambiguous (Italian or Latine, for example), my mother was the darkest of her siblings and did not have the privilege of trying on different racial identities. Valerie Moss presented as Black, and she knew so from an early age.

In their home, as in many Caribbean households, a premium was placed on having lighter skin. Centuries of white supremacy and institutional racism led to internalized beliefs that the closer one's appearance aligned with European aesthetics, the more valued they were as human beings. My mother experienced the effects of this colorism firsthand. She was not the child chosen to represent the family on various outings or community events; her darker hue meant that she was not