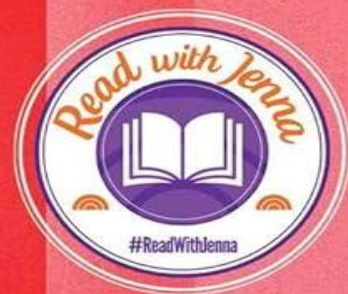
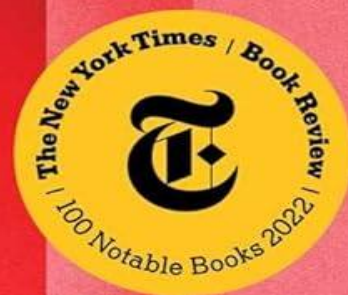


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THE SCHOOL FOR GOOD MOTHERS

A NOVEL

JESSAMINE CHAN



"Propulsive . . . Eerily prescient . . . Picks up the mantle of Margaret Atwood and Kazuo Ishiguro at a moment when state control over women's bodies (and autonomy) feels ever more chilling." —VOGUE

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THE SCHOOL
for **GOOD MOTHERS**

A NOVEL

JESSAMINE CHAN

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NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

For my parents

I wanted to find one law to cover all of living, I found fear. A list of my nightmares is the map of the way out of here.

—ANNE CARSON, *Plainwater*

1.

“WE HAVE YOUR DAUGHTER.”

It's the first Tuesday in September, the afternoon of her one very bad day, and Frida is trying to stay on the road. On the voice mail, the officer tells her to come to the station immediately. She pauses the message, puts down her phone. It's 2:46 p.m. She meant to get home an hour and a half ago. She pulls onto the first side street off Grays Ferry and double-parks. She calls back and begins apologizing, explaining that she lost track of time.

“Is she okay?”

The officer says the child is safe. “Ma'am, we've been trying to reach you.”

Frida hangs up and calls Gust, has to leave a message. He needs to meet her at the station at Eleventh and Wharton. “There's a problem. It's Harriet.” Her voice catches. She repeats the officer's promise that their daughter is safe.

As she begins driving again, she reminds herself to stay under the speed limit, to avoid running red lights, to breathe. All through Labor Day weekend, she felt frantic. Last Friday and Saturday, she had her usual insomnia, sleeping two hours each night. On Sunday, when Gust dropped off Harriet for Frida's three and a half days of custody, Harriet was in the throes of an ear infection. That night, Frida slept ninety minutes. Last night, an hour. Harriet's crying has been relentless, too big for her body, too loud for the walls of their tiny house to absorb. Frida did what she could. She sang lullabies, rubbed Harriet's chest, gave her extra milk. She laid on the floor next to Harriet's crib, held her impossibly perfect hand through the bars, kissed her knuckles, her fingernails, feeling for the ones that needed to be trimmed, praying for Harriet's eyes to close.

The afternoon sun is burning as Frida pulls up to the station, located two blocks from her house in an old Italian neighborhood in South Philly. She parks and rushes to the reception desk, asks if the receptionist has seen her daughter, a toddler, eighteen months old; half Chinese, half white; big brown eyes, curly dark brown hair with bangs.

“You must be the mother,” the receptionist says.

The receptionist, an elderly white woman wearing a smear of pink lipstick, emerges from behind the desk. Her eyes flick over Frida from head to toe, pausing at Frida’s feet, her worn-out Birkenstocks.

The station seems to be mostly empty. The receptionist walks with halting steps, favoring her left leg. She leads Frida down the hall and deposits her in a windowless interrogation room where the walls are a cloying mint green. Frida sits. In crime movies she’s seen, the lights are always flickering, but here the glare is steady. She has goose bumps, wishes for a jacket or scarf. Though she’s often exhausted on the days she has Harriet, now there’s a weight bearing down on her chest, an ache that has passed into her bones, numbing her.

She rubs her arms, her attention fading in and out. She retrieves her phone from the bottom of her purse, cursing herself for not seeing the officer’s messages immediately, for having silenced her phone this morning after getting fed up with endless robocalls, for having forgotten to turn the ringer back on. In the past twenty minutes, Gust has called six times and sent a stream of worried texts.

Here, she writes finally. Come soon. She should call back, but she’s afraid. During her half of the week, Gust calls every night to find out if Harriet has new words or motor skills. She hates the disappointment in his voice when she fails to deliver. But Harriet is changing in other ways: a stronger grip, noticing a new detail in a book, holding Frida’s gaze longer when they kiss good night.

Resting her forearms on the metal table, Frida puts her head down and falls asleep for a split second. She looks up and spots a camera in the corner of the ceiling. Her mind returns to Harriet. She’ll buy a carton of strawberry ice cream, Harriet’s favorite. When they get home, she’ll let Harriet play in the tub as long as she wants. She’ll read Harriet extra books at bedtime. *I Am a Bunny. Corduroy.*

The officers enter without knocking. Officer Brunner, the one who called, is a burly white man in his twenties with acne at the corners of his mouth. Officer Harris is a middle-aged Black man with a perfectly groomed mustache and strong shoulders.

She stands and shakes hands with both of them. They ask to see her driver’s license, confirm that she’s Frida Liu.

“Where is my baby?”

“Sit down,” Officer Brunner says, glancing at Frida’s chest. He flips his notebook to a blank page. “Ma’am, what time did you leave the house?”

“Maybe noon. Twelve thirty? I went out for a coffee. And then I went to my office. I shouldn’t have. I know. It was so stupid. I was exhausted. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to... Can you please tell me where she is?”

“Don’t play dumb with us, Ms. Liu,” Officer Harris says.

“I’m not. I can explain.”

“You left your baby at home. Alone. Your neighbors heard her crying.”

Frida spreads her palms on the table, needing to touch something cold and solid. “It was a mistake.”

The officers arrived around two, entering through the breezeway. The sliding glass door between Frida’s kitchen and backyard was open, with only the flimsy screen door protecting the child.

“So your toddler... Harriet is her name? Harriet was alone for two hours. Is that right, Ms. Liu?”

Frida sits on her hands. She’s left her body, is now floating high above.

They tell her that Harriet is being examined at a crisis center for children. “Someone will bring her—”

“What do you mean, examining her? Look, it’s not what you think. I wouldn’t—”

“Ma’am, hold on,” Officer Brunner says. “You seem like a smart lady. Let’s back up. Why would you leave your kid alone in the first place?”

“I got a coffee, and then I went into work. I needed a file. A hard copy. I must have lost track of time. I was already on the way home when I saw that you called. I’m sorry. I haven’t slept in days. I need to go get her. Can I go now?”

Officer Harris shakes his head. “We’re not done here. Where were you supposed to be today? Who was in charge of the baby?”

“I was. Like I told you, I went to work. I work at Wharton.”

She explains that she produces a faculty research digest, rewriting academic papers as short articles with takeaways for the business community. Like writing term papers on subjects she knows nothing about. She works from home Monday through Wednesday, when she has custody—a special arrangement. It’s her first full-time job since Harriet was

born. She's been there for only six months. It's been so hard to find a decent job, or any job, in Philly.

She tells them about her demanding boss, her deadline. The professor she's working with right now is eighty-one. He never sends his notes by email. She forgot to bring his notes home with her last Friday, needed them for the article she's finishing.

"I was going in to grab the file and then come right back. I got caught up with answering emails. I should have—"

"This is how you showed up to work?" Officer Harris nods at Frida's bare face, her chambray button-down, stained with toothpaste and peanut butter. Her long black hair tied in a messy bun. Her shorts. The blemish on her chin.

She swallows. "My boss knows I have a baby."

They scribble in their notebooks. They'll do a background check, but if she has any prior offenses, she should tell them now.

"Of course I don't have a record." Her chest is tight. She begins to cry. "It was a mistake. Please. You have to believe me. Am I under arrest?"

The officers say no. But they've called Child Protective Services. A social worker is on her way.

×

Alone in the mint-green room, Frida gnaws at her fingers. She remembers retrieving Harriet from her crib and changing her diaper. She remembers giving Harriet her morning bottle, feeding her yogurt and a banana, reading to her from a Berenstain Bears book, the one about a sleepover.

They'd been up off and on since 4:00 a.m. Frida's article was due last week. All morning, she went back and forth between Harriet's play corner and back to the living room sofa, where she had her notes spread out on the coffee table. She wrote the same paragraph over and over, trying to explain Bayesian modeling in layman's terms. Harriet kept screaming. She wanted to climb onto Frida's lap. She wanted to be held. She grabbed Frida's papers and threw them on the floor. She kept touching the keyboard.

Frida should have put on a show for Harriet to watch. She remembers thinking that if she couldn't finish the article, couldn't keep up, her boss would rescind work-from-home privileges and Harriet would have to go to day care, something Frida hoped to avoid. And she remembers that she then plopped Harriet in her ExerSaucer, a contraption that should have been retired months ago as soon as Harriet started walking. Later, Frida gave Harriet water and animal crackers. She checked Harriet's diaper. She kissed Harriet's head, which smelled oily. She squeezed Harriet's pudgy arms.

Harriet would be safe in the ExerSaucer, she thought. It couldn't go anywhere. What could happen in an hour?

Under the harsh lights of the interrogation room, Frida bites her cuticles, pulling off bits of skin. Her contacts are killing her. She takes a compact from her purse and examines the gray rings under her eyes. She used to be considered lovely. She is petite and slender, and with her round face and bangs and porcelain-doll features, people used to assume she was still in her twenties. But at thirty-nine, she has deep creases between her brows and bracketing her mouth, lines that appeared postpartum, becoming more pronounced after Gust left her for Susanna when Harriet was three months old.

This morning, she didn't shower or wash her face. She worried the neighbors would complain about the crying. She should have closed the back door. She should have come home right away. She should never have left. She should have remembered the file in the first place. Or gone in over the weekend to grab it. She should have met her original deadline.

She should have told the officers that she can't lose this job. That Gust hired a mediator to determine child support. He didn't want to waste money on legal fees. With Gust's rewarding but poorly paid position, his student-loan debt, and her earning potential, and the fact that custody would be shared, the mediator suggested that Gust give her \$500 a month, not nearly enough to support her and Harriet, especially since she gave up her job in New York. She couldn't bring herself to ask him for more. She didn't ask for alimony. Her parents would help her if she asked, but she can't ask, would hate herself if she did. They already funded her entire life during the separation.

It's four fifteen. Hearing voices in the hall, she opens the door and finds Gust and Susanna conferring with the officers. Susanna approaches and embraces Frida, keeps

holding on as Frida stiffens, enveloped in Susanna's lush red hair and sandalwood perfume.

Susanna rubs Frida's back as if they're friends. The girl is on a mission to nice her to death. A war of attrition. Susanna is only twenty-eight, a former dancer. Before Susanna appeared in her life, Frida hadn't understood that the gap between twenty-eight and thirty-nine could be so potent and deadly. The girl has a fine-boned elfin face, with huge blue eyes that give her a fragile, storybook quality. Even on days when she does nothing but childcare, she wears black winged eyeliner and dresses like a teenager, carrying herself with a confidence that Frida never possessed.

Gust is shaking hands with the other men. Frida stares at the ground and waits. Old Gust would yell. As he did on the nights she hid in the bathroom and wept instead of holding the baby. But this is New Gust, the one who hugs her tenderly despite her delinquency, who's been made placid by Susanna's love and toxin-free lifestyle.

"Gust, I'm so sorry."

He asks Susanna to wait outside, then takes Frida's arm and leads her back into the mint-green room, where he sits beside her, cradling her hands. It's been months since they were alone together. She feels ashamed for wanting a kiss even now. He's more beautiful than she ever deserved, tall and lean and muscular. At forty-two, his angular face is lined from too much sun, his sandy, graying waves grown longer to please Susanna. He now resembles the surfer he'd been in his youth.

Gust squeezes her hands tighter, hurting her. "Obviously, what happened today..."

"I haven't been sleeping. I wasn't thinking. I know that's no excuse. I thought she'd be fine for an hour. I was just going to go in and come right back."

"Why would you do that? That's not okay. You're not raising her alone, you know. You could have called me. Either of us. Susanna could have helped you." Gust grips her wrists. "She's coming home with us tonight. Look at me. Are you listening, Frida? This is serious. The cops said you might lose custody."

"No." She pulls her hands away. The room spins.

"Temporarily," he says. "Sweetie, you're not breathing." He shakes her shoulder and tells her to take a breath, but she can't. If she does, she might vomit.

On the other side of the door, she hears crying. "Can I?"

Gust nods.

Susanna is holding Harriet. She's given her some apple slices. It always kills Frida to see Harriet's ease with Susanna, her ease even now, after a day of illness and fear and strangers. This morning, Frida dressed Harriet in a purple dinosaur T-shirt and striped leggings and moccasins, but now she's in a raggedy pink sweater and jeans that are much too big, socks, but no shoes.

"Please," Frida says, taking Harriet from Susanna.

Harriet clutches Frida's neck. Now that they're together again, Frida's body relaxes.

"Are you hungry? Did they feed you?"

Harriet snuffles. Her eyes are red and swollen. The borrowed clothes smell sour. Frida pictures state workers taking off Harriet's clothes and diaper, inspecting her body. Did anyone touch her inappropriately? How will she ever make this up to her baby? Will it be the work of months or years or a lifetime?

"Mommy." Harriet's voice is hoarse.

Frida leans her temple against Harriet's. "Mommy is so sorry. You have to stay with Daddy and Sue-Sue for a while, okay? Bub, I'm so sorry. I really messed up." She kisses Harriet's ear. "Does it still hurt?"

Harriet nods.

"Daddy will give you the medicine. Promise you'll be good?" Frida starts to say they'll see each other soon but holds her tongue. She hooks Harriet's pinkie.

"Galaxies," she whispers. It's their favorite game, a promise they say at bedtime. *I promise you the moon and stars. I love you more than galaxies.* She says it when she tucks Harriet in, this girl with her same moon face, same double eyelids, same pensive mouth.

Harriet begins falling asleep on her shoulder.

Gust tugs on Frida's arm. "We need to get her home for dinner."

"Not yet." She holds Harriet and rocks her, kissing her salty cheek. They need to change her out of these disgusting clothes. They need to give her a bath. "I'm going to miss you like crazy. Love you, bub. Love you, love you, love you."

Harriet stirs but doesn't answer. Frida takes a last look at Harriet, then closes her eyes as Gust takes her baby.

The social worker is stuck in rush-hour traffic. Frida waits in the mint-green room. Half an hour passes. She calls Gust.

“I forgot to tell you. I know you guys are cutting back on dairy, but please let her have dessert tonight. I was going to let her have some ice cream.”

Gust says they’ve already eaten. Harriet was too tired to eat much. Susanna is giving her a bath now. Frida apologizes again, knows this might be the beginning of years of apologizing, that she’s dug herself a hole from which she may never emerge.

“Stay calm when you talk to them,” Gust says. “Don’t freak out. I’m sure this will be over soon.”

She resists saying *I love you*. Resists thanking him. She says good night and begins pacing. She should have asked the officers which neighbors called. If it was the elderly couple who have faded postcards of Pope John Paul II taped to their screen door. The woman who lives on the other side of the back fence, whose cats defecate in Frida’s yard. The couple on the other side of her bedroom wall, whose luxurious moans make her lonelier than she is already.

She doesn’t know any of their names. She’s tried saying hello, but when she does, they ignore her or cross the street. Since last year, she’s rented a three-bedroom row house near Passyunk Square. She’s the only nonwhite resident on her block, the only one who hasn’t lived there for decades, the only renter, the only yuppie, the only one with a baby. It was the largest space she could find on short notice. She had to have her parents cosign the lease; she hadn’t found the job at Penn yet. West Philly was close to work but too expensive. Fishtown and Bella Vista and Queen Village and Graduate Hospital were too expensive. They’d moved here from Brooklyn when Gust, a landscape architect, was recruited by a prestigious green-roofing firm in Philly. His company’s projects focus on sustainability: wetlands restoration, stormwater systems. Gust said that in Philly, they’d be able to save up and buy a house. They’d still be close enough to visit New York whenever they wanted. It would be a better place to raise children. She’s stuck in the smallest city she’s ever lived in, a toy city where she has no support network and only a few acquaintances, no real friends of her own. And now, because of joint custody, she has to stay until Harriet turns eighteen.

One of the overhead lights is buzzing. Frida wants to rest her head but can’t shake the feeling of being watched. Susanna will tell her friends. Gust will tell his parents. She’ll

need to tell *her* parents. She's torn off most of the cuticle on her left thumb. She becomes aware of her headache, her dry mouth, her desire to leave this room immediately.

She opens the door and asks permission to use the bathroom and get a snack. From the vending machine, she buys peanut butter cookies and a candy bar. She hasn't eaten since breakfast. Only coffee. All day, her hands have been trembling.

When she returns, the social worker is waiting for her. Frida drops the half-eaten candy bar and awkwardly retrieves it, getting a good look at the social worker's taut calves in black capri pants, her sneakers. The woman is young and striking, maybe in her midtwenties, has evidently come straight from the gym. She wears a spandex jacket over a tank top. A gold cross hangs low above her cleavage. Her arm muscles are visible through her clothes. Her dyed-blond hair is slicked into a ponytail that makes her wide-set eyes look reptilian. She has beautiful skin, but she's wearing a tremendous amount of foundation, her face made up with contours and highlights. When she smiles, Frida sees her gleaming white movie-star teeth.

They shake hands. The social worker, Ms. Torres, points out the bit of chocolate on Frida's lips. Before Frida can wipe it away, the social worker begins photographing her. She spots Frida's torn cuticles and asks her to display her hands.

"Why?"

"Do you have a problem, Ms. Liu?"

"No. It's fine."

She takes a close-up of Frida's hands, then her face. She studies the stains on Frida's shirt. She props up her tablet and begins typing.

"You can sit."

"My ex-husband said my custody might be suspended. Is that true?"

"Yes, the child will remain in her father's care."

"But it won't ever happen again. Gust knows that."

"Ms. Liu, this was an emergency removal because of imminent danger. You left your daughter unsupervised."

Frida flushes. She always feels like she's fucking up, but now there's evidence.

"We didn't find any signs of physical abuse, but your daughter was dehydrated. And hungry. According to the report, her diaper leaked. She'd been crying for a very long time.

She was in distress.” The social worker flips through her notes, raises an eyebrow. “And I’m told your house was dirty.”

“I’m not normally like this. I meant to clean over the weekend. I would never harm her.”

The social worker smiles coldly. “But you did harm her. Tell me, why didn’t you take her with you? What mother wouldn’t realize, *If I want or need to leave the house, my baby comes with me?*”

She waits for Frida’s response. Frida recalls this morning’s mounting frustration and angst, the selfish desire for a moment of peace. Most days, she can talk herself down from that cliff. It’s mortifying that they’ve started a file on her, as if she were beating Harriet or keeping her in squalor, as if she were one of those mothers who left their infant in the back seat of a car on a hot summer day.

“It was a mistake.”

“Yes, you’ve said that. But I feel like there’s something you’re not telling me. Why would you decide all of a sudden to go into the office?”

“I went to get a coffee. Then I drove to Penn. There was a file I forgot to bring home. I only had a hard copy. I’m working on an article with one of the most senior professors in the business school. He’s complained about me to the dean before. When I misquoted him. He tried to have me fired. And then when I got to the office, I started answering emails. I should have been keeping track of time. I know I shouldn’t have left her at home. I know that. I screwed up.”

Frida tugs at her hair, pulling it loose. “My daughter hasn’t been sleeping. She’s supposed to take two naps a day, and she hasn’t been napping at all. I’ve been sleeping on her floor. She won’t fall asleep unless I’m holding her hand. And if I try to leave the room, she wakes up instantly and totally flips out. The past few days have been a blur. I’ve been overwhelmed. Don’t you have days like that? I’ve been so tired I’ve had chest pains.”

“All parents are tired.”

“I intended to come right back.”

“But you didn’t. You got in your car and drove away. That’s abandonment, Ms. Liu. If you want to leave the house whenever you feel like it, you get a dog, not a kid.”

Frida blinks back tears. She wants to say she’s not the same as those bad mothers in the news. She didn’t set her house on fire. She didn’t leave Harriet on a subway platform. She

didn't strap Harriet into the back seat and drive into a lake.

"I know that I seriously messed up, but I didn't mean to do this. I understand that it was a crazy thing to do."

"Ms. Liu, do you have a history of mental illness?"

"I've had depression on and off. That's not what I meant. I'm not—"

"Should we assume that this was a psychotic break? A manic episode? Were you under the influence of any substances?"

"No. Absolutely not. And I'm not crazy. I'm not going to pretend I'm some perfect mother, but parents make mistakes. I'm sure you've seen much worse."

"But we're not talking about other parents. We're talking about you."

Frida tries to steady her voice. "I need to see her. How long will this take? She's never been away from me for more than four days."

"Nothing is resolved that quickly." The social worker explains the process as if she's rattling off a grocery list. Frida will undergo a psychological evaluation, as will Harriet. Harriet will receive therapy. There will be three supervised visits over the next sixty days. The state will collect data. CPS is rolling out a new program.

"I'll make my recommendation," the social worker says. "And the judge will decide what custody plan will be in the child's best interests."

When Frida tries to speak, the social worker stops her. "Ms. Liu, be glad the child's father is in the picture. If we didn't have the kinship option, we'd have to place her in emergency foster care."

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Tonight, again, Frida can't sleep. She needs to tell the family court judge that Harriet was not abused, was not neglected, that her mother just had one very bad day. She needs to ask the judge if he's ever had a bad day. On her bad day, she needed to get out of the house of her mind, trapped in the house of her body, trapped in the house where Harriet sat in her ExerSaucer with a dish of animal crackers. Gust used to explain the whole world that way: the mind as a house living in the house of the body, living in the house of a house, living in the larger house of the town, in the larger house of the state, in the houses of

America and society and the universe. He said these houses fit inside one another like the Russian nesting dolls they bought for Harriet.

What she can't explain, what she doesn't want to admit, what she's not sure she remembers correctly: how she felt a sudden pleasure when she shut the door and got in the car that took her away from her mind and body and house and child.

She hurried away when Harriet wasn't looking. She wonders now if that wasn't like shooting someone in the back, the least fair thing she's ever done. She bought an iced latte at the coffee shop down the block, then walked to her car. She swore she'd come home right away. But the ten-minute coffee run turned into thirty, which turned into an hour, which turned into two, then two and a half. The pleasure of the drive propelled her. It wasn't the pleasure of sex or love or sunsets, but the pleasure of forgetting her body, her life.

At 1:00 a.m., she gets out of bed. She hasn't cleaned in three weeks, can't believe the police saw her house this way. She picks up Harriet's toys, empties the recycling, vacuums her rugs, starts a load of laundry, cleans the soiled ExerSaucer, ashamed she didn't clean it earlier.

She cleans until five, becoming light-headed from the disinfectants and bleach. The sinks are scrubbed. The tub is scrubbed. The hardwood floors are mopped. The police aren't here to notice her clean stovetop. They can't see that her toilet bowl is pristine, that Harriet's clothes have been folded and put away, that the half-empty take-out containers have been discarded, that there's no longer dust on every surface. But as long as she keeps moving, she won't have to go to sleep without Harriet, won't expect to hear her calling.

She rests on her clean floor, her hair and nightshirt soaked with sweat, chilled by the breeze from the back door. Usually if she can't sleep and Harriet is here, she retrieves Harriet from her crib and holds her while Harriet sleeps on her shoulder. Her sweet girl. She misses her daughter's weight and warmth.

×

Frida wakes at ten with a runny nose and sore throat, eager to tell Harriet that Mommy finally slept, that Mommy can take her to the playground today. Then she realizes, with

slow-blooming dread, that Harriet isn't home.

She sits up and rolls her aching shoulders, remembering the social worker and the mint-green room, being treated like a criminal. She pictures the officers entering this narrow dark house, finding frightened Harriet in the middle of the clutter. Perhaps they saw the mostly empty cupboards and refrigerator. Perhaps they saw crumbs on the countertop, balled-up paper towels, tea bags in the sink.

Frida and Gust each kept the furniture they'd brought into the marriage. Most of the nicer pieces were his. Most of the decor and artwork. They were in the process of redecorating their old place when he moved out. Her current house was painted in pastels by the owner, the living room pale yellow, the kitchen tangerine, the upstairs lavender and pale blue. Frida's furniture and decorations clash with the walls: her black photo frames, her plum-and-navy-blue Persian rug, her olive-green slipper chair.

She hasn't been able to keep any plants alive. The living room and kitchen walls are bare. In the upstairs hallway, she's only hung a few photos of her parents and grandmothers, an attempt to remind Harriet of her ancestry, though Frida doesn't know enough Mandarin to properly teach her the language. In Harriet's room, in addition to a string of brightly colored fabric flags, she's hung a photo of Gust from eight years ago. She's wanted Harriet to see her father here, if only his picture, though she knows Gust doesn't do the same. That is one of the terrible things about joint custody. A child should see her mother every day.

She checks her phone. She's missed a call from her boss, who wants to know why she hasn't responded to his emails. She calls back and apologizes, claims to have food poisoning. She requests another extension.

After showering, she calls her divorce lawyer, Renee. "I need you to squeeze me in today. Please. It's an emergency."

×

Frida's narrow street is empty this afternoon, though on sunny days, the elderly neighbors like to gather on lawn chairs on the block's tiny strip of sidewalk. She wishes they could see her now. She's wearing tailored trousers, a silk blouse, wedge heels. She's

applied makeup, hidden her puffy eyelids behind thick tortoiseshell frames. The police officers and social worker should have seen her like this, competent and refined and trustworthy.

Renee's office is on the fifth floor of a building on Chestnut Street, two blocks north of Rittenhouse Square. For a time last year, this office felt like Frida's second home. Renee, like a big sister.

"Frida, come in. What happened? You look pale."

Frida thanks Renee for meeting on such short notice. She looks around, remembering the time when Harriet drooled on the leather couch and picked every piece of lint off the rug. Renee is a heavysset brunette in her late forties who favors cowl-neck sweaters and dramatic turquoise jewelry. Another New York transplant. They initially bonded over being outsiders in a city where it feels as if everyone has known each other since kindergarten.

Renee remains standing as Frida explains what happened, leaning against her desk with crossed arms. She's angrier than Gust and Susanna were, more shocked and disappointed. Frida feels as if she's talking to her parents.

"Why didn't you call me last night?"

"I didn't understand how much trouble I was in. I fucked up. I know that. But it was a mistake."

"You can't call it that," Renee says. "These people don't care about your intentions. CPS has been getting more aggressive." Two children died under their watch last year. The governor said there's no margin of error. New rules are being implemented. There was a referendum in the last local election.

"What are you talking about? This wasn't abuse. I'm not like those people. Harriet is a baby. She won't remember."

"Frida, leaving your baby home alone is no small thing. You understand that, don't you? I know moms get stressed out and walk out the door sometimes, but you got caught."

Frida looks down at her hands. She foolishly expected Renee to comfort her and offer encouragement, like she did during the divorce.

"We're going to call this a lapse in judgment," Renee says. "You can't call it a mistake anymore. You have to take responsibility."

Renee thinks getting custody back may take weeks. At worst, a few months. She's heard CPS is moving much faster now. There's some new focus on transparency and accountability, something about data collection, giving parents more opportunities to prove themselves. They're trying to streamline the process nationally, so there's less variation from state to state. The difference between states was always problematic. Still, so much depends on the judge.

"Why haven't I heard about this?" Frida asks.

"You probably didn't pay attention, because it didn't apply to you. Why would you? You were just living your life." Frida should focus on the long game: being reunited with Harriet, case file closed. Even when she regains custody, there will probably be a probation period with further monitoring, maybe a year. The judge may require Frida to complete a whole program—home inspection, parenting classes, therapy. Phone calls and supervised visits are better than nothing. Some parents get nothing. Even if she completes every step, there are unfortunately no guarantees. If, God forbid, worst-case scenario, the state finds her unfit and decides against reunification, they could terminate her parental rights.

"But that can't happen to us. Right? Why are you even telling me this?"

"Because you need to be very careful from now on. I'm not trying to scare you, Frida, but we're talking about the family court system. I want you to know the kind of people you're dealing with. Seriously, I don't want you joining one of those parents' rights message boards. This is not the time to advocate for yourself. You'll make yourself nuts. It's not like there's any privacy anymore. You have to remember that. They'll be watching you. And they haven't made any specifics of the new program public."

Renee sits down next to Frida. "I promise, we're going to get her back." She rests her hand on Frida's arm. "Listen, I'm so sorry, but I need to take my next appointment. I'll call you later, okay? We'll figure this out together."

When Frida tries to stand, she can't move. She takes off her glasses. The tears come suddenly.