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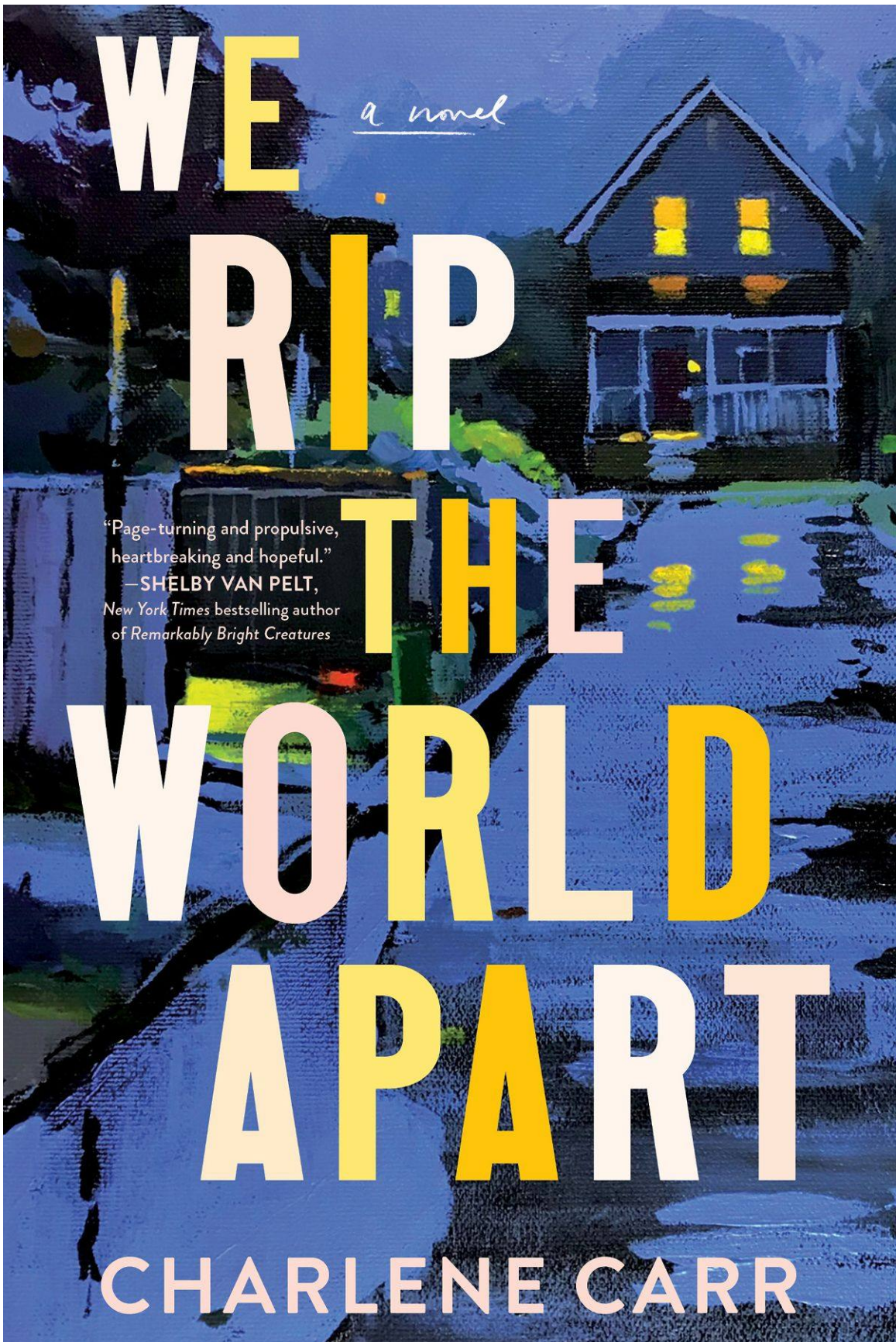
“Page-turning and propulsive,  
heartbreaking and hopeful.”  
—SHELBY VAN PELT,  
*New York Times* bestselling author  
of *Remarkably Bright Creatures*

THE

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CHARLENE CARR



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**WE** *a novel*  
**RIP**  
**THE**  
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**APART**

**CHARLENE CARR**



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*For my grandmother Violet,  
who died before I was even a thought.*

*It was wondering about your life, who you may have been and what my  
parents' and family's lives may have been like if you  
were with us, that led to the first inklings of this story.*

*And for my father:  
you lost your mother when you were so young  
you have no stories to tell, only a few scant memories,  
along with the sense, at times, that seeing me  
gives you glimpses of her.*

This novel portrays scenarios that are deeply disturbing and highlight some of the worst beliefs and behaviors of our society, particularly in relation to racial and physical violence. Please be kind to yourself as you read. Set the book aside or speak with someone you trust if you need time or help to process your emotions.



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## Author's Note

When Kareela refers to “Brown” people in the novel, the word denotes not physical color, but origin: people of African descent who more recently have emigrated from the Caribbean (or “West Indies”), and who, in the community I grew up in, which would be similar to that of my characters, thought of that term as an acknowledgment of cultural connection and a natural way to differentiate themselves from Black people not from the Caribbean.

# Kareela

## *Halifax*

**May 25, 2022**

A small wave undulates in the depths of my abdomen as I sink to the edge of the tub. Phone in hand, I stare at the lighted screen, at numbers in little boxes that seem like they can't be true but are. The wave, almost imperceptible, ripples again—not nausea, but something else. Expansion. The body making room. I'd read about this during a scare six or seven years ago. My first year in uni, weeks after a night I'd drunk to excess, gone home with a stranger, then felt the sheer relief when the twenty-five-dollar test stick revealed a single bright line.

I scroll back through the calendar in front of me, my breath quickening, the sickness that brought me to the bathroom taking on a terrifying meaning. Phone still in hand, pressing against my brow, I lower my other palm to my abdomen, hold it there. The body making room—whether I want it to or not.

I stand and hurry through the bathroom door, then sink to the couch, pulling my already open laptop toward me, searching for another explanation. For symptoms that could confirm or deny what I already know.

I scan the first page, then another, everything I see making the fear mount. I turn to my phone again and stare. Fourteen days.

The screen buzzes. A message from Jasmine—*Girl, where are you? That belly bug doing better yet? 'Cause it's time to MARCH!* 🗣️ 🗣️

The rally.

I look at the clock on my phone, see I'm already late. But my eyes draw back to the calendar. Fourteen days from the last day I would have guessed I'd have my period, which is so irregular, I never really know when it'll show. Fourteen days, which would make me at least six weeks along. Yet as pressing as this feels, I don't have to make a decision this minute. I have time. I can go to the rally. I will—despite the promise I made all those years ago. Despite the fear that slithers at the thought of it.

The door to the apartment opens and I slam the laptop shut, then slide it onto the coffee table. Thomas grins at me, his blue eyes lit with something between happiness and relief, the blond wave of his hair falling across the side of his forehead as he shakes it back uselessly. “So glad I didn't miss you. You ready to head out?” He gestures toward the door.

“Huh?”

“To the rally.” He laughs. “Didn't you say we were going?”

I stand. Realization and unease twist inside me like a rag between nervous hands. A lump of something seems to stick in my throat. “I said *I* was going.”

“Yeah, so let's—” Thomas stops, something in my voice or expression cluing him in. “You don't want me to come?”



“It’s just—” I take a step toward him, uncertain how to express this resistance to his presence. Not wanting to hurt him. “I mean, I’m meeting my colleagues.”

“Uh-huh.” He steps inside. Closes the door. And I imagine, like me, feels the problem, though he can’t quite make sense of it. The way I felt it the first time we were together in their presence, my colleagues’ tight smiles at him—the only white face in the crowd—putting a rancid taste in the back of my throat. How seeing their surprise made me wonder at the politics of race in choosing a partner, something I’d never wondered much about before. As I smiled back, made introductions, saw the discomfort from both sides and realized what it stemmed from, it wasn’t embarrassment that filled me, it wasn’t shame, but something uncomfortably similar to both.

“And there’s that plan for Black people to arrive early. To be alone. To...” My voice trails off, but not before cracking. I can’t risk that feeling again today. That awkwardness and uncertainty about whether—if this is the life I am leaning toward, with this community—he can be a part of it.

He nods. “I just thought I’d wait nearby. Meet up with you after.”

I open my mouth, then close it, my own insecurity forefront. *I don’t even know if I have a right to be there*, I think, but can’t say. *Not quite Black. Not white. Both and neither.*

“And with my brother...”

“All the more reason—” He stops, catching himself. About Antony, he never pushes. “Okay.” His smile looks genuine, but hurt rests in his eyes. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is.” I smile back, my thoughts shifting from us to the rally—the promise I’m about to break—but also to what’s growing inside me, whether the hurt

in his eyes will multiply, fester, if I decide to stop that growth. I reach for my bag and clench my fingers over the strap as it falls across my chest. My mouth opens again. *Thomas*, I should say, then let the rest come out. But my mouth closes. I lean forward and rest a hand on his chest, then place a chaste kiss on his lips, too chickenshit to speak.

Breathless, the liberated curls I'm still learning how to take care of frizzing in the heat, I arrive at Spring Garden Road, just between the entrance to the Public Gardens and Victoria Park. My heart pounds from the exertion, but also from the fact that I'm here at last, doing what my father wanted to do in his final days.

I'm fifteen minutes late—two years and fifteen minutes—having missed the time for racial solitude, to sit and memorialize not just the loss of a life that's brought us here today, but all the losses before and after, and the crowd is growing by the minute. Hundreds. Maybe thousands. A sea of Black and Brown faces. Other faces, too. Every color, every ethnicity. But it's the Black and Brown that strike me. More than I've ever seen congregated in the city, more than I knew existed. The streets are blocked off, with only police cruisers anywhere in sight on the road ahead. I maneuver my way toward the front of the massive crowd, knowing that's where Jasmine will be, but with her nowhere in sight, I pull out my phone. Before I have a chance to dial, a hand lands on my shoulder. I'm spun and embraced. I step back to the sight of her in a T-shirt displaying a fist similar to the ones in her text.

"You better?" Jasmine looks at me, head cocked to the side, hands on my shoulders.

When I nod, fighting to conceal the fear and uncertainty welling within me, she nods back, then grabs my hand, drawing us through the crush of bodies. Before we've reached the front, the march begins. Hands still clamped together, our arms raise in the air. Our voices, too, in unison, not

just with each other, but with all the voices around us. Chanting words that are more than chants. More than a plea. A battle cry erupting through our throats, not just our voices, but the voices of our parents, our grandparents. Our grandparents' grandparents' grandparents.

NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE.

BLACK LIVES MATTER.

NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE.

BLACK LIVES MATTER.

As we pass one block, then another and another, and turn onto Barrington Street, the thrum in my chest syncing with the rhythm of our voices is like nothing I've ever felt. The whole experience like nothing I imagined. The tears. The joy. Connection. I thought I'd feel guilt—shame that this is my first time. I thought I'd feel like an impostor.

Instead, I feel known.

We turn into Grand Parade, where a stage, the type usually used for concerts, is set up. I'm uncertain if everyone will fit but, almost as if it's been scripted, it's the Black and Brown bodies that enter the space, the others waiting, allowing us room. As I move forward, Jasmine still beside me, all that fear that kept me away until now, the things I'd seen on television—rubber bullets, tear gas, barricades—and the things I knew of more intimately, seem a world away. There is none of it. Instead, peace. Camaraderie.

Mostly.

As we find a spot in the crowd, my gaze falls upon the officers lining the sides—there to ensure the protest remains peaceful—and the eyes of at least three of them hold what I dreaded: the desire to step out of line, to attack. These officers, one young, one old, one middle-aged, gaze at us as if they itch to pull out their clubs, bash them against us. See the blood flow.

Yet they stay still.

I tear my gaze away, telling myself I'm seeing things, that my mind's recreating the look I imagined on the faces of three other officers. With the thrust of the crowd, I move forward, until they're out of sight and—the people around me still chanting, singing, gyrating—almost out of mind.

A man steps onto the stage, others behind him. He comes to the center, and a hush settles. The others, five on each side, flank out in a motion that feels choreographed, imitating the motion of birds in flight. The man takes a knee, and two by two, so do the others. So do we. A screen I've only just noticed blinks to life. A countdown. Eight minutes and forty-six seconds.

Sobs, choking breaths, stifled gasps fill the air, mixing with the distant whir of cars in the unblocked streets. My chest shakes, my eyes burn, as the minutes, then seconds, count down. Then we stand—all of us—refusing to be held down any longer, feeling empowered, feeling as if we've taken something back.

And yet...

My throat is closing, pushing away that joy, that connection that existed just minutes ago. I came. I marched. But nothing tangible has changed.

The man on the stage speaks, though I only catch snippets—the way the city painted “Black Lives Matter” on the street without involving the Black community, how these decisions need to be in our hands. How words are