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Lisa Genova

A NOVEL

MORE OR LESS
MADDY

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More or Less Maddy

A NOVEL

LISA GENOVA



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For Sarah, Kim, and Katie

“I don’t think anybody should feel bad if they get diagnosed with a mental illness because it’s just information about you that helps you know how to take better care of yourself.”

—Taylor Tomlinson

“I wish you could feel what it feels like to be in my head.”

—Selena Gomez

CHAPTER 1

Maddy stares at the ceiling fan above her. The blades look cheap. The base is modest. The ceiling is much too high anyway. How would she even get up there? Only a few hours ago, she would've been able to invent a spectacular solution, some elaborate scaffolding or a flying trapeze. She was a gifted genius who could transform into whatever the situation called for—architect, engineer, acrobat.

Now look at her.

Even if she had a ladder handy and that fan could hold the weight of her long enough to break her neck and choke off her air supply, she doesn't possess the energy it would take to rig a noose out of a belt or scarf or a pair of leggings. She can't even get up to pee.

The fan isn't centered above the bed. Or the bed isn't centered below the fan. Either way, the asymmetry annoys her. She laughs on the inside, a moment of relief, loving the irony. Asymmetry bothers her. That's funny.

A steady stream of frigid air blasts from a vented panel in the corner of the ceiling onto her naked body, making her unbearably cold. Her skin looks like raw chicken. The top sheet and comforter lie in a heap on the floor at the foot of the bed. The thermostat is on the other side of the room. It might as well be in Connecticut.

She feels a stretch of flaky film on the inside of her right thigh, a sticky, damp sheet under her bottom. What was his name again? No idea. Is he still here? She quiets her breathing and listens for sounds of life coming from the bathroom or living room. She hears the air-conditioning and her heart throbbing in her ears and nothing else.

She sees broken shards of glass on the floor and remembers now. She kicked him out around five in the morning. She had songs to write, and all he wanted to do was fuck. He was a distraction—not even a good one, she might add—and she needed to be disciplined if she was going to win a Grammy. So he had to go. He protested quite a bit, was still only

half-dressed when she threw a bottle of Tito's at his head. Was it Dylan maybe? No, Dylan was another night. Doesn't matter.

She looks at the digital alarm clock on the bedside table. 11:04. It was just after sunrise when she felt unexpectedly tired and closed her eyes, anticipating a wink of a catnap. This is the most she's slept in days.

What day is it?

Through the open bedroom door, she can see the piano in the living room and the horrifyingly incoherent song lyrics in her handwriting all over the wall. She remembers justifying this graffiti when she ran out of hotel stationery, that she wasn't vandalizing, that the Palazzo would want to preserve her handwritten lyrics on the wall, that it would actually increase the value of the hotel suite. *This is where Maddy Banks wrote her debut, platinum, Grammy award-winning album.*

No matter that she's not a songwriter, that she's basically tone-deaf and doesn't know how to play the piano. That didn't stop her. Nothing ever does. Nothing but the crash.

She was supposed to be here for only two nights, Friday and Saturday. She was one of the six comedians performing at Planet Hollywood for the New York Does Vegas show, which was a big-deal gig for her to get. Her older sister, Emily, begged her not to go. Her mother texted her a very preachy, when-are-you-going-to-learn lecture.

You know your sleep is going to get all messed up. You always forget what happens, and then you just keep repeating the same hell over and over.

Maddy nodded, her face forged with seriousness, and responded,

Says the woman who had three children

Maddy's face then exploded with laughter. She's sure her mother's face did not. Her mother wouldn't know funny if it knock-knocked over her chardonnay.

But her mother wasn't wrong. The change in time zone certainly was enough to throw her off. But all seemed fine, and her sets went great. Then again, she thought those idiotic song lyrics on the wall were great. There had been a bachelorette party in the audience the first night, a predictable nightmare, but she handled them like a pro. In fact, she

remembers killing it, especially the second night. But it's possible she talked too fast and rambled new material. History has proved that what she thinks happened and what actually happened aren't always a pair of aces.

She went out with some of the guys after Saturday night's show and stayed up all night. That might've done it. She also drank way too much. And had a bump of coke. It could've been the coke. And she hates to admit this and will do so only if cornered, but she stopped taking her meds, left the pill bottles back in New York. Even now, she's not sure if this was an act of deliberate defiance or innocent absentmindedness. Her answer is going to depend on who's asking.

At some point she switched rooms because she required a suite. *We have one with a baby grand piano.* Perfect! She would write her debut album while she was here. She'd been too busy in New York pursuing her comedy career and didn't have the time or space, but now she had a suite in Vegas with a piano and no need for sleep. She'd write the album and find a producer to record it. Taylor Swift would connect her with the right people. Maybe she'd even want to fly in and collaborate, sing one or two of the songs with her. Of course she would.

Maddy wonders how much this suite costs per night, how many nights she's been here, how much credit card debt she's just racked up that she has no way of paying. And for what purpose? She closes her eyes, trying to shut out the shame, but the call is coming from inside the house.

She needs to get out of here. She needs her phone. It's probably blowing up with texts and missed calls from her mother and Emily. But her phone's not here. She lost it.

That's not true. She sees the memory playing in her mind's eye as if she were watching an Instagram reel. She threw it into the mock canal in front of the Venetian. On purpose. She had reason to believe that the government was tracking her, that the FBI was monitoring and detaining women they deemed dangerous, and she had to evade them at all cost. There's nothing more threatening to the status quo than a female comic. They are brave as fuck and only speak the truth.

But she's not feeling especially brave right now. She needs to get up, take a hot shower, and get the hell out of here, but she can't summon the energy to get out of bed. She can only stare, motionless at the motionless fan, useless in every conceivable way. The high is over. Here comes the crash.

The crash is not a hangover or a drug withdrawal or even karmic payback for a week of reckless all-nighters. It's a familiar, dreaded houseguest come to visit, a hated, sleazy distant cousin from out of town who shows up unannounced and overstays, sometimes for months. And there's nothing she can do but open the door and let him in.

Hours ago, she was on an unstoppable quest to become the next Taylor Swift. Winning a Grammy was her manifest destiny. She was a national treasure. This would be funny if it weren't so utterly stupid and tragic.

The need to get up and go, to evade what's coming, rises in her chest like a swarm of angry wasps, but her body is already too heavy, a dead-bug specimen pinned in place. Somewhere in her being, a trapdoor opens, and through it she's leaking all confidence, worth, enthusiasm, and life force by the gallon. She's becoming heavier than that baby grand and hollowing out at the same time. And while all her superpowers leave her like air spewing out of a deflating bouncy house, in marches the army of negative thoughts, trained and ready to slay. She pictures the infestation, black ants by the thousands covering her defenseless brain like a sticky-sweet picnic.

This is why you're never going to make it.

You suck.

You're the worst.

Your mother is going to have to come out here to save your pathetic ass.

Your mother is tired of saving your pathetic ass.

She'd be better off without you.

Everyone would be better off without you.

She wishes she could get up to pee. If she were dead, she wouldn't have to pee. She stares up at the fan, regrettably out of reach. Being dead would solve everything.

EIGHTEEN MONTHS BEFORE VEGAS

SPRING

CHAPTER 2

Maddy paws at her nightstand without opening her eyes until her fingers find the shape of her phone. She lifts it to her face and squints at the time. 2:17.

A.m. or p.m.?

The thick navy-blue curtains drawn over blackout shades on the two windows shut out any evidence of sunlight. Her bedroom is middle-of-the-night dark, a timeless, seasonless cave perfect for sleeping, which is perfect for her because that's all she's wanted to do since she arrived home three days ago. She hears muffled sounds of life wafting in from the kitchen downstairs, landscaping motors growling from some neighbor's immaculate yard.

P.m.

She begins doing math in her head, but this hurts her brain, and she gives up, tossing the effort over to her fingers. She just slept for seventeen hours. Too much and not enough.

Second-semester finals were brutal. She barely slept at all the last week of school, pulling all-nighter after all-nighter, fueled by coffee, Lemon Elation yerba mates, and an unrecommended diet of Lucky Charms, food truck waffles, and Cool Ranch Doritos. It's no wonder she needed to crash.

Despite all that studying, she's pretty sure she bombed her exams. She'd been an honor roll student in high school, all four years. She never got straight As like her older sister, Emily, but she didn't try to, either. Her mother and her stepfather, Phil, had encouraged and pressured her to bump her Bs up to As. *It's a competitive world out there. You need to set yourself apart.* Her mother spoke in clichés and dangled shopping incentives. She sent Maddy links to commencement speeches meant to light a fire under her butt. When cheering her on and positive reinforcement didn't work, they tried scaring her into

perfect grades, citing single-digit college acceptance rates and sharing stories of a friend's daughter who was rejected by every school she applied to and was now addicted to drugs. But none of it convinced Maddy to do more.

She remembers studying Napoleon in tenth-grade history class. She got a B on the exam. Could she have studied harder, regurgitated more about the Battle of Austerlitz, and gotten an A? Probably. But what would've been the point? How is a battle between a bunch of dudes on another continent that took place over two hundred years ago in any way relevant to the modern-day life of a teenage girl in suburban Connecticut? It's just not.

Other than for getting into college, she can't see how anything she learned in high school mattered in any practical sense. She still doesn't know how to change a car tire, sew a button, or cook anything more complicated than macaroni and cheese. And the Battle of Austerlitz hasn't come up once.

Satisfied with the easily attainable, mediocre excellence of honor roll over high honors, she found everything to be easy-breezy in high school. Her first year of college at NYU was nothing but hard—the impossible-to-keep-up-with workload, living with a roommate who drove her crazy, having no clue what to major in, still not finding her passion or circle of friends, losing Adam. Twice. Her mother, Phil, Emily, her older brother Jack, and her teachers all promised college would be the best time of her life. So far, it's been the worst. She must be doing it wrong.

Inexplicably still tired but also tired of sleeping, she stares up at the ceiling, visiting the constellation of characters she created as a child on moonlit nights, before her mother installed the blackout shades. Random cracks and divots became animals, a face with a Roman nose in profile, a gun, a girl with a wide-open mouth; a bulldog, a movie star, a serial killer, his victim. Her bedroom ceiling, a sky full of stars—funny how the brain insists on meaning when there's nothing there at all.

The scale tips, and she gets out of bed, her entire body stiff and angry with this decision. She shuffles into the bathroom. Light from the window assaults her like a slap to the face, and she winces in physical pain. She pees with her eyes closed.

At the sink, she studies herself in the mirror—her matted, mousy-brown hair, cut in a chin-length bob; unremarkable brown eyes; bowling ball-round head that is always and embarrassingly too big for hats. Ugly nose. Too many freckles.

It's undeniably her, but she's detached from the reflection, spellbound by the creepy feeling that she's caught in the gaze of a stranger, or even an animal, something not quite human. She looks into the pupils of her expressionless eyes, a bottomless muddy-brown swamp of nothingness. No shimmery sparkle, no amusement past or present skipping along a laugh line.

She leaves the bathroom without washing her hands or brushing her teeth and trudges down the hallway, the hardwood floors beneath her bare feet cool and polished to a gleaming, spotless shine. She passes the massive abstract painting, chaotic in color and composition, absurdly expensive and created by a "significant" contemporary artist, hung on the wall at the top of the stairs since Maddy was ten or so. She can't remember what, if anything, was there before.

She used to try imagining what the artist had intended. She could detect the outline of a dog near the top right, a series of lines that could be a mountain range, the face of Hitler if she squinted. But, in truth, the piece depicts none of these things, and unable to understand what she was looking at, Maddy used to feel anxious about it. Her mother, on the other hand, loved the painting and would often pause at the top of the stairs to marvel over it. But like every other pricey precious thing in this house, its newness faded over time, and now everyone just passes by it without noticing or feeling anything.

Maddy walks down the stairs and into the kitchen on autopilot and sits in her seat at the table. Wearing tennis whites and diamond earrings heavy enough to stretch her earlobes, her mother stands at the marble island counter facing Maddy, cutting up a watermelon. Her salon-blond hair is damp with sweat, her blue eyes underscored by thick smudges of black eyeliner.

"Good, you're finally up. You have an appointment with Dr. Taber in an hour."

"What? Why?"

"Your annual physical."

Maddy groans. "I don't want to go."

"It's good to get these things done when you're home. You have a dentist appointment next week."

"I'm tired."

"You can't still be tired. You've been in bed all day."

"I don't want to go to a pediatrician. I'm almost twenty."

“You can switch to someone else next year. He’s retiring his practice in the fall anyway.”

“This is stressing me out. My head hurts.”

“You’re just hungry. Want some watermelon?”

“No.”

Her mother ignores her and places a platter of sliced watermelon on the table.

“I have sourdough. I can make you a grilled cheese.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Her mother fetches cheese and butter from the refrigerator, a loaf of sourdough from a bread basket on the counter, and a frying pan from a low cabinet.

“What are you going to do about a summer job?”

“I don’t know. Is Emily home?”

“She’s babysitting at the Rogens.”

“Where’s Jack?”

“Playing golf.”

Her mother assembles the cheese and bread on the buttered pan. Waiting, left hand on her hip, she studies Maddy. “They’re hiring waitstaff at Pine Meadows.”

Maddy rolls her eyes. “God no.”

“I saw Sofia yesterday at Starbucks. She’s a barista there.”

Sofia was her best friend from kindergarten through eighth grade. They did everything together—dance class, riding lessons, sleepovers on the weekends. They dressed in matching clothes, painted their nails the same colors, and made each other countless friendship bracelets. Her favorite had alternating pink and navy-blue clay beads surrounding *MB ♥ SL 4EVA* in white letter beads.

In ninth grade Maddy started seeing Adam, which naturally meant she wasn’t always available to hang out with her bestie like they used to. Maddy assumed Sofia would understand, but she was hurt and offended instead, said Maddy chose her new popular jock boyfriend over their friendship. Which she kind of had.

She’d hoped Sofia would find a boyfriend, too, so then Sofia wouldn’t depend solely on Maddy for her entire social life. And then they could also double date. But Sofia wasn’t into boys, so that didn’t happen, and she never liked Adam. They both stopped

wearing their friendship bracelets, and their freshman-year rift widened into an impassable canyon by senior year.

On graduation day, Sofia's mother asked them to stand together for a picture. Maddy remembers posing shoulder to shoulder with her former best friend on the football field, plastering a big fake smile on her face just long enough for Sofia's mother to take the photo, feeling nothing in particular, a quick, meaningless pause before resuming the day's celebration with Adam and her family. As she thinks about that moment now, her heart aches.

"I don't want to work at Starbucks. I'll see everyone."

"So? Wouldn't that be nice, to see people instead of sitting inside all day doing nothing?"

"Not really."

"Well, you can't sleep the days away and be a blob all summer." She looks Maddy up and down. "Are you still in that same tank and sweats? Have you even showered since you've been home?"

Her mother transfers the grilled cheese sandwich onto a plate and walks it over to Maddy. She leans over her daughter and sniffs.

"God, Maddy, you smell like the bottom of your brother's hamper. I'm going to shower and change. Eat and then you do the same, please. I'll drive you to Dr. Taber."

Her mother spins on her white tennis shoes and leaves the kitchen. Maddy pokes the crispy top of the grilled cheese with her finger. She slumps back in her chair and checks her phone.

Two unread messages from Adam.

First year of college was impossibly hard. Being back home is already harder.

CHAPTER 3

Maddy did not shower or change her clothes, and her mother is not pleased. Embarrassed to be associated with Maddy's appearance and odor and wanting to make a point, her mother sits three seats to the right of Maddy in Dr. Taber's waiting room, leaving two empty chairs between them, as if the receptionist and the mother of the toddler squatting over a farm-animal puzzle can't figure out their relationship. Or care. Maybe if Maddy stays in this grimy outfit all summer, her mother will continue to leave her alone.

Clipboard in her lap, Maddy begins filling out the intake forms handed to her by the receptionist. She remembers the ridiculous top page from last year.

Do you brush and floss your teeth daily?

She hasn't gotten around to unpacking yet; her electric toothbrush is in one of her duffel bags.

Yes

Do you wear sunscreen when you are outdoors?

Never.

Yes

Do you always wear a helmet when riding a bike?

She rode a Citi Bike from somewhere in Brooklyn back to her apartment at three in the morning a few months ago, and she did not wear a helmet. The bikes don't come with them, most don't fit her big head, and she wouldn't use a rental helmet that had been on someone else's sweaty, possibly lice-infested dome even if they did.

Yes

Do you always wear a seatbelt in the car?

Yes

That answer is the God's honest truth. It's not like she has a death wish.

How many hours do you sleep at night?

None, seventeen, it depends.

8

From there, the questionnaire gets weirder.

Are you missing a kidney, testicle, eye, or any organ?

Testicle

What type of milk do you drink? (circle one)

Whole 2% 1% Nonfat None

How many ounces of milk do you drink a day?

Do you drink or eat three servings of calcium-rich foods daily, such as milk, cheese, yogurt?

She pauses, unsure of how to answer. Hasn't cow's milk been shown to be saturated with hormones, cholesterol, and something that causes acne? She wonders if her pediatrician's been bought off by some dairy lobbyist. *Sure, you might die of colon cancer or a stroke with a face full of zits, but you'll have bones like oak trees, and we'll have summer homes in the Hamptons. Drink up.*

Got integrity?

Assuming this is an outdated form based on an ancient food pyramid, she circles *1%*, guesses *8*, and writes *Yes*.

Are you happy with your weight?

What kind of evil trickery is this? Show her a girl on this planet who answers a genuine *yes* to this question, and Maddy will spit in her eye. She tugs the bottom of her tank top down over her belly.

Yes.

The next sheet is clearly a depression survey, and cold liquid panic floods her body. They didn't give her this form last year. She glances up at the receptionist. Her expressionless face is pointed at her desktop computer. Her mother's is glued to her phone; she's probably scrolling Facebook, liking photos of other people's flawless children.

Pen hovering, Maddy reads down the page, her inner voice rattling off her real responses, answers that will have to be edited before they reach her hand.

0. I do not feel sad

1. I feel sad sometimes

2. I feel sad most of the time

3. I feel sad all of the time

0. I look forward to the future

1. I feel anxious about the future

2. I believe my future is bleak

3. I am hopeless about the future

0. I never feel bad about myself

1. I sometimes feel bad about myself

2. I regularly don't like myself

3. I hate myself

No zeros. None. It's a dumb quiz probably created by a women's magazine or more likely a pharmaceutical company, trolling for higher profits. She thinks about the year she just survived, away from home for the first time. Adam broke up with her, they got back together, and he broke up with her again. She didn't make any real friends, she didn't like

her roommate or her classes, and she got less-than-impressive grades. She has no idea what she wants to do with her life or even later today.

So yeah, her life is kind of depressing at the moment. Plus, who can feel hopeful about the future when the planet is dying? She's simply feeling what a normal person would feel under these crappy circumstances. She picks at the black crud caked beneath her thumbnail as she decides what to do. She tilts the clipboard so no one can read her answers, an unnecessary precaution since no one is sitting anywhere near her, and circles zeros down the page, throwing in a couple of ones so she doesn't appear unrealistically perfect.

- 0. I never have any thoughts of killing myself
- 1. I have thoughts of killing myself but would never carry them out
- 2. I would like to kill myself but haven't made a plan
- 3. I want to kill myself and know how I would do it

She dwells on this last set, rereading each choice as if considering which appetizer to order off a take-out menu, hungry and torn between all of them.

"Madison?"

Her head jolts up. The receptionist is looking at her. Maddy circles 0 and stands up. As she passes through the waiting room door, she imagines the question they should've asked.

Are you the kind of person who would lie on your medical forms to avoid further inquiry?

Yes

In exam room two, Maddy sits on a strip of parchment paper like she's the centerpiece displayed on a dining room table runner, watching Dr. Taber read over her intake forms. He's slender with a neatly trimmed white beard, wearing light-blue scrubs and dark-blue Crocs, stethoscope slung around his neck, dressed for the part. His shiny bald head is mottled with dark-brown age spots like islands on a map. His eyebrows bounce up above the frames of his black-rimmed glasses several times as he reads, but he says nothing. She

fidgets and switches the cross of her legs, causing the paper beneath her to crinkle like a bag of chips, but Dr. Taber doesn't look up.

Bored of studying him, she lets her eyes wander the exam room. The posters on the wall opposite her are all aimed at little kids. A chubby toddler blowing on a dandelion. *You're Growing Like a Weed*. Elmo eating his vegetables. A glass of milk sporting a smiling cartoon face and muscular arms. *Protein Power*. More pushy dairy propaganda. She'd like to rip that bullshit poster off the wall but doesn't have the guts or the energy. Maybe she just needs a tall glass of milk.

"So, Madison. You're nineteen now. Growing up."

He smiles and stares at her, eager, as if there were a question in there expecting an answer.

"Are you attending college?" he asks.

"NYU."

"Great school. What are you majoring in?"

"I haven't picked one yet."

"That's fine. I see you've gained some weight since last summer," he says, now referring to her chart.

Despite having no urge to eat at the moment, she did gain about twenty pounds this year, mostly around her thighs and butt. And belly. And she can see it in her face. Basically everywhere but her elbows. She blames the whole drama with Adam. And the waffle food truck that's always parked in front of her dorm. Again, Dr. Taber seems to be waiting for a response when he didn't ask a question.

"That's not uncommon, especially for girls your age. Back in my day, they called it the Freshman Fifteen."

He smiles at her, pleased with himself, as if his anecdote were cute or funny, a joke they should share. She remains tight-lipped, not amused or willing to play along. He returns to the pages on the clipboard.

"It looks like you're feeling a little blue?"

Here, his intonation is unquestionably a question, and she feels pressured into some kind of reply. She hates herself for not circling all zeros. She shrugs.

"Also normal for girls your age. When was the first day of your last period?"