



Nikki Erlick

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE MEASURE

THE POPPY FIELDS

A Novel

"A masterful, tender exploration of love, loss, and the poignant echoes of memory—profoundly moving." —JAMIE FORD, *New York Times* bestselling author

**THE
POPPY
FIELDS**

A NOVEL

NIKKI ERLICK



WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

*For my sister, Landy, who joined me on this great road trip in 1997 and has
sat beside me in the car ever since*

Epigraph

A long—long Sleep—A famous—Sleep—
That makes no show for Morn—
By Stretch of Limb—or stir of Lid—
An independent One—

—Emily Dickinson

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Nikki Erlick

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Prologue

There is a place, hidden among the sweeping sandy swaths of southern desert, where all you can see is red.

From above, it's a carpet of crimson, but as you lean closer, you see that it's not one singular sheet of color, but rows upon rows of distinct red dots. Thousands of them. All of them nearly identical. Most of them silent and still. Some occasionally vibrating with movement. Like a wild field of poppies.

Except it's nothing like that.

Because the little red dots are not flowers, but people.

People who journeyed many miles to get here. People who came here to sleep.

Thousands of them now rest atop unfamiliar beds, clothed in the same crisp red pajamas.

Some of them will sleep for just one month.

Others will sleep for longer.

Some of them closed their eyes and felt ready, even eager.

Others fell asleep still afraid.

Some of them feel like patients here.

Others feel more like experiments.

And some will not feel this until they awaken, the ones who wake up with the side effect.

Many of them hope their loved ones will forgive them for choosing this strange path.

And yet, nearly all of them felt they had no choice at all.

Before they sleep, they think of their mothers and fathers and siblings, they think of their friends and lovers and spouses. They think of the big things, the milestones missed, the last time their hands touched, the words both said and unsaid. They think of the small things, the one crooked tooth, the scent of the pillow in the morning, the laugh in the middle of a joke. They remember the people they've lost.

Their heartbreaks are burned into their bodies, their bodies that lie on the beds. The bodies they have all made the choice to shut down, if only for a while.

Needles pinch at the creases in their arms, tethering them to the tubes that send them to sleep and then keep them alive as they heal.

Someday, they will all wake up.

For now, though, they sleep alone, in this sequestered space in the desert. But they are not alone. They carry the pain that comes for us all, the weight ultimately thrust upon everyone. Here, inside the Poppy Fields, there is rarely an empty bed.

In those final fleeting moments before the sleep sets in, each of them wonders what comes next.

This sleep will not make things right, on that they can all agree. It will not give sense to the senseless; it will not fill the yawning hole.

But maybe, just maybe, it will help.

Because they have each been told, over and over, that the only way out of a hardship is through.

But nobody ever told them that they had to stay awake.

Ava woke up with her face imprinted on the paper, slumped across her wooden desk, the piece of charcoal still in her grip, as PJ tugged at the hem of her dress.

She peeled her cheek off the sketch pad and uncurled her body, wincing slightly, nearly knocking over the cup of cold, cloudy tea she'd intended to drink last night. She could already see the sunshine glowing behind her shutters. Had she slept straight through her alarm?

Briefly panicked, Ava twisted her watch around to check the time, the charcoal stains on her fingertips smudging across her wrist, as if she'd melted down all her freckles and then blended them back together. Thankfully, she wasn't late.

She leaned over to give PJ a grateful pat, caressing the dog's head lightly. And that's when the alarm on her cellphone sounded. Somehow, PJ always managed to beat the alarm by one minute.

Ava wasn't surprised that she'd fallen asleep while working; she hadn't slept very well the prior night. Or the night before that. Or any night, really, since she booked her flight. Since she decided to find her sister.

Ava slid her glasses back up her nose, then glanced at herself in the mirror. A dark sheen coated the side of her face that had spent the night pressed against her drawing. Her cardigan had wrinkled while hunched in the chair, but it still looked fine enough to wear to the airport, Ava thought. The patch she'd sewn onto the left arm was holding up well, covering the hole her elbow had poked through the sleeve and adding a bright burst of purple to the otherwise plain white sweater. Ava never bothered trying to match fabrics, as she wasn't nearly skilled enough to make her mending look

seamless. (Granny Mae had taught her the essential steps but failed to pass on her talent.)

She quickly showered, fed PJ his breakfast, and boiled a fresh pot of water for tea, picking out her favorite ceramic mug, the first one she'd ever made. Ava's shelves were now filled with her handmade pieces, and this "cup" was one of her worst—it was essentially just a shrunken bowl, since, at the time of its molding, she hadn't yet learned how to add a handle—but the misshapen creation always made Ava smile. She'd chosen a slate-gray glaze that looked blue from certain angles, like the sky just before a storm, with tiny, scattered orange speckles, stars that snuck out during daylight. Ava thought, perhaps, the cup would bring her luck on her journey that day.

As PJ finished his meal in a corner of the kitchen, Ava leaned against the countertop and stared at her hands, wrapped tightly around the warmth of her mug, trying to distract herself from mentally enacting every possible scenario of what might happen after her plane landed at LAX. Ava owed her hands everything. Her hands had given her a decade-long career as an artist; they'd allowed her to buy her own home. Her hands gave her joy at the pottery wheel and the sewing machine and the garden. And yet, whenever Ava battled a particularly strong bout of anxiety, her hands ended up bearing the most obvious scars. She would scratch at her cuticles viciously, leaving the skin pink and jagged and cracked. Often, at least one finger was wrapped in a bandage, while the rest of them were dry and dirty from hours at the sketch pad or in the soil out back. Her nails, of course, were always bare—no manicure stood a chance. Ava knew that her hands looked ugly. But they'd still built her a beautiful life.

She washed and dried her mug, then prepared to leave her house, planning to give PJ his morning walk, then head straight to the airport together.

Ava checked that the burner under the kettle was off.

She checked that her hair dryer wasn't plugged in.

She checked that she had snacks for PJ, snacks for herself, her two books on loan from the library, and, of course, her paper and pencils.

She doubled back into the kitchen, checking the stovetop again. Just to be sure.

She grabbed PJ's leash and carrier, grabbed her luggage, and locked the door behind them.

She checked that the door was, in fact, locked.

Then she checked her watch.

Three and a half hours until her flight. An hour-long cab ride from her house in Topeka to the airport in Kansas City. Another three and a half hours

in the air from Kansas City to Los Angeles. And that's when things would get difficult. She'd reserved a car to pick her up at the airport and take her all the way out to the desert. But once in the desert . . . who knew?

Ava wondered if her sister was worth all this effort, after the way Emmy had treated her. Plus, she had no idea what sort of state her sister would be in, thanks to the nobody-*really*-knows-what that goes on inside the Poppy Fields, where Emmy currently was. The whole place was something of a mystery.

Ava tried to imagine her older sister among the dirt and the dust, the cacti and the coyotes, and whatever else made its home in the wilds of the southern California desert where the Poppy Fields was located. (Of course, it was nearly impossible for uninvited outsiders to access the facility—another challenge to be dealt with later.)

It was also quite likely that Emmy did not want to be found and that Ava was chasing after someone who'd spent her whole life running fast. Perhaps she should just leave Emmy alone, Ava thought, the way that Emmy had left her alone.

Ava stood outside her front door and looked down at PJ, who seemed to sense her hesitation, as if he could hear the rattling of Ava's ever-chattering mind. He offered her an encouraging bark and began to tug gently at his leash. *It's time to go.*

And Ava always listened to PJ.

2

Ray was engulfed in darkness, hunched on his hands and knees.

There was a wooden platform underneath him, that much he could tell, though he couldn't feel many details in the texture through his thick gloves and layers of clothing, his folded body currently weighted down by fifty pounds of cumbersome gear.

He slowly began to crawl.

As the platform started sloping upward beneath him, he moved cautiously, unable to see anything in front of him, yet aware that *he* was being watched. He followed the incline, gradually climbing up and up and up.

Until he fell.

Or, more technically, until he was hurled forward, the platform suddenly tilting downward, like the world's most treacherous seesaw. Ray felt like the floor had dropped out from under him. He tumbled straight off, his stomach flipping . . .

. . . and landed on dozens of pillows.

Ray tossed around briefly, regaining his bearings, then trying to stand himself up, until something that felt like a fishing net abruptly landed on top of him. He flailed beneath the thick ropes, pushing, pulling, sliding. But the net barely moved. It was too heavy. It was pinning him down. He was immobile, ensnared.

Ray heard a voice from above in the pitch-black basement. "What's happened to you? What do you do now?"

Of course there was a protocol for times like this, for a firefighter lost or trapped, critically injured or unable to move. Call a mayday. Call for rescue. Do it fast, do it *now*, before your tank runs out of oxygen, before you can no longer speak.

Ray was lying in the deep well of pillows, enmeshed in the netting. The clock was counting down. But Ray didn't want to call it. Calling mayday was the very last resort. Calling mayday was admitting defeat. It was the pilot ejecting from his jet, mere seconds before the plane crashed. Ray tried to heave the net off his body, willing his well-trained muscles to coordinate, to lift himself up.

But the buzzer went off, one loud judgmental blare.

Ray had run out of time.

Ray was still thinking about that training session the next morning, as his cab pulled away from the fire station. Never mind that he'd finished the exercise and gone straight into a hectic shift, the following twenty-four hours witnessing a nasty fall down the stairs, a three-car pileup, a diabetic shock, and a torched backyard after two teenage boys celebrated the end of final exams with a homemade firework show. That was all fairly standard for Ray.

What wasn't standard was that he had failed the test.

The basement simulation had been purposefully designed to be impossible, inescapable. And Ray, like nearly his entire crew that day, had ignored the official safety procedures. He had taken too long to call for help.

Ray played with the zipper on his dark green backpack resting on the seat beside him. He was *pretty sure* he could've gotten out. If only he had a few more tries at the test. If only he had a little more time.

But there was never enough time, was there?

Ray wasn't sure of much nowadays, but he felt certain, as his cab made its way to the airport, that Johnny would not have failed.

Johnny was just as strong and courageous as the rest of them, just as dedicated to the job, but somehow, he never seemed saddled with the same sense of pride. Johnny would have known to call mayday.

Ray spotted the first signs for the airport exit and felt the pinpricks of guilt needling inside. The squad knew that he was flying today; he'd cashed in most of his vacation time and swapped a handful of shifts for the week. But he'd told everyone that he planned to go fishing. And though Ray had insisted that nobody treat him with kid gloves, everyone was happy to trade a few days so Ray could "take some time for himself." Ray hated the way they said this, how that phrase was always accompanied by *the look*. The look they'd been torturing him with for months. The look that was too earnest, too cloying, especially for a gang of so-called grown-ups who still covered the toilet with cling wrap as a welcome gift to new rookies. Even that morning, as a few guys were wolfing down their breakfast in the kitchen, still

grumbling about the basement training they'd failed, they had all wished Ray good luck on his fishing trip, bidding him goodbye with *the look*.

Ray had never lied to his crew before.

But he couldn't exactly have told them the truth, informed them of where he was actually going. They would have tried to talk him out of his plan, argued that grief was clouding his thinking. *Would your brother have wanted that?* they'd ask.

But that right there was the problem. Nobody really knew what Johnny would have wanted, now, in this moment, and no one could ask him, ever again. And as far as Ray was concerned, there was only one thing—really, one *place*—to blame.

Ray turned to look out the window of the car, the runways and the flat, boxy buildings of the airport emerging up ahead. He was arriving later than he'd planned, that backyard fire taking longer than expected to douse. And now, the sky appeared ominous before him, suddenly hazy and gray. It was getting too dark too fast.

"I'd pick up some speed, if you can," Ray told the driver. "Then park your car and take cover."

"You think a storm's coming?" the driver asked.

A spiky shock of lightning lit up in the distance, a bright silver vein against the ashen sky.

"Something's coming," said Ray.

3

Ava had arrived, unsurprisingly, quite early at the airport, so she sat at a table in one of the tiny terminal cafés and pulled out her art supplies.

Ava had taken up drawing as a child, at her grandmother's suggestion, to keep her hands busy when she felt overwhelmed, welding her fingers around a slim colored pencil to prevent them from anxiously attacking each other. But she quickly found that she loved the feel of the smooth pigmented surface, loved the smell of the pencil, loved the fact that she could build whole worlds on her paper and imagine herself living inside them.

As the endless succession of pre-boarding and final boarding and final *final* boarding announcements droned on above her, Ava began mindlessly doodling her dog. She'd adopted PJ from a shelter three years ago when he was still very young, and she'd learned that he was a mix of breeds. He had the curls and the cleverness of a poodle—Ava had briefly considered naming him Charley, after Steinbeck's famed poodle and cherished companion—but lacked the long neck and nose and legs. His most head-turning trait was his brilliant chestnut fur, his coat like a fresh copper penny. It had taken Ava several tries to first capture the shade on paper, until finally animating PJ's paws with the perfect melding of reds and yellows and browns, just the right amount of pressure on the pencil. And by now, drawing PJ was easy, instinctive. The simplicity of the task allowed Ava's thoughts to roam, and she couldn't help but think of her sister, unaware of Ava's imminent approach.

Ava's artistic talent had always belonged to her alone, whereas Emmy was skilled in almost everything else. She seemed to relish her role as the older sister, charging ahead while Ava trailed. Emmy was assertive when Ava cowered, determined when she was unsure. Ava felt most comfortable immersed within the illustrated worlds she made for herself or the fictional

worlds of books, while Emmy seemed to have been born with the belief that the real world was made for her. Of course, it wasn't her intention, but Emmy's strengths had often made Ava feel flawed, Emmy's natural tenacity throwing Ava's timidity into starker relief. But Emmy was four years older and always four hundred steps ahead. And she'd already started disappearing from Ava's life before she disappeared in the Poppy Fields.

Ava glanced up at the screen tracking arrivals and departures. Her flight was still on time. At least that was one less concern. There were, of course, dozens of other concerns humming along in the background of Ava's brain. Would there be turbulence on the flight? Would PJ behave? Would her seatmate take off their shoes? Ava didn't really mind flying that much, although she always sat in the exit row—the obvious choice for ease of evacuating—and she did end up panic-pressing the call button multiple times on her most recent flight to a wedding, when she noticed some water leaking above the emergency exit door. (She was eventually informed by the flight attendant, somewhat patronizingly, that it was “just condensation” and not, in fact, evidence of the hostile outside atmosphere attempting to bust down the hatch.)

Ava tried to let herself relax, just a little, leaning back into her seat, focusing on the sketch of PJ.

But PJ himself was not relaxed.

He stood up suddenly in his carrier, nose tilted toward the ceiling, vigorously sniffing around him.

“Is everything okay?” Ava cupped PJ's face in her hands, staring at his glassy brown eyes. She could feel his body twitching slightly, growing ever more agitated. He started to scratch at the ground.

PJ must have detected some shift in the air, and now he was trying to warn her.

Ava stuffed her sketch pad into her bag, lifted the strap of the dog carrier onto her shoulder.

And sure enough, it was only a matter of moments before the tornado touched down.