

Greenwich



A Novel

Kate Broad

GREENWICH



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For Robert

One deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation.

HANNAH ARENDT, *The Human Condition*

I

ONE

I went to Greenwich at the last minute, to do what I thought would be some good. It was the summer before college, and I needed a fresh start, a clean slate, the chance to atone for some mistakes my seventeen-year-old self had made.

But I left my aunt and uncle's house early, before the summer was over, stuffing my clothes into garbage bags. I was crying too hard to pack. The mistakes had only compounded—I was the same person making them all. I never got to say goodbye to Claudia, to explain myself or tell her how I felt. All I could do was practice my lines, repeating the words like a prayer: *It was nobody's fault. I didn't see anything. It was just an accident.*

I wasn't lying.

But not lying isn't the same as telling what happened. Telling what happened, I've learned, doesn't have to mean telling the truth. I stuck to partial stories, a simpler account. Carrots sliced. Baths filled and drained. As though all Claudia and I did that summer was drink coffee and wring out our bathing suits and sing *Two more minutes, Sabine!* while my cousin played magic, played fairies, dressed up like a princess, a queen. My aunt Ellen on the phone or running errands. My uncle Laurent busy at work. Everyone believed me. My parents, the police, the lawyers who said I made a perfect witness. I was finally being *good*—I was doing what they wanted. Or that's what I told myself, most of the time.

It had seemed so exciting at first, the train ride down with the late June sunlight sparkling off the coast, the money my mother had given me fat and full of promise in my purse. Aunt Ellen was a star to me then, a woman of spa trips and gifts for no occasion, partial to buttery leather and buttery cheeses both flown in from France. She was late picking me up at the train station, but that wasn't unusual. It didn't raise any alarms.

When her Jaguar finally pulled up she did seem different, somehow. But that was typical, too. Ellen always seemed a little different to me, her hair always dyed a different shade of dusky blond, a little longer, a little shorter, bangs or no bangs or teased out or totally straight. Everything she wore was black, white, or cream, a mix of fitted and draped, but then there'd be a burst of color somewhere: her nails, her purse, a brooch, a belt. That day it was white denim, a white silk blouse, snakeskin boots with a heel. She looked stunning. She always did. I can still picture the teardrop opening of the neckline, her collarbone lying so neatly underneath.

Now when I think of my aunt, that blistering summer, that same silk is smeared with blood. But she never recycled an outfit—she wouldn't have reworn that blouse. And anyway, it was Claudia, not Ellen, who was with me when it happened. Memory has its gaps, its tricks and little deceptions. But it's all I have, after the fact. The ways that I remember.



“Rachel!”

My aunt called out the window and I scrambled up from the curb, turning off my Discman. “Hi, hi, sweetheart, I'm so happy to see you. You weren't waiting long, were you? You look wonderful, I wish I had your hair.”

I touched the back of my neck. I'd chopped it off right before graduation, all the way up to my chin, and I couldn't tell her I hated it, that when I looked in the mirror, I wanted to cry at what I'd done.

“It's so thick,” Ellen said as she got out of the car. “I've never had that kind of volume. But if I could pull it off, you know.” She ran her tongue over

her front teeth as though to wipe a smear of lipstick that wasn't there; the pink was impeccably set. "I'd love to be brave like you." She popped the trunk, adding that she was sorry she couldn't help with the suitcase.

"Is it still hurting?" I asked. My mother had warned me to be careful when talking about Ellen's injury. I was to be patient but not indulgent, positive but not dismissive, sensible without making her feel criticized.

It was an impossible position.

But Ellen held out her arms for a hug, awkward because I was so much taller. "You're sweet to ask." Her shoulder pressed into my breastbone. Her hair spray smelled like chemicals and fruit. "I'm fine, really. Just no heavy lifting. Which is hopeless with a three-year-old—every time I look at Sabine, I swear she's grown." A laugh, stepping away now. "And you—a high school graduate! Who can believe it?"

I gave a thin smile. I didn't want to think about it—not high school, not home. My mother had bought the Amtrak ticket for herself, a short visit, saying it'd be good to have a *check-in*, Ellen needed some *family time*. It didn't matter how long it had been or how much Ellen insisted she was fine. No one could fall off a horse and bounce back *just like that*.

But my mother couldn't take a week off now, not even a long weekend, not while my sister was—

She'd developed this new habit of no longer finishing her sentences. While Jules was *what*? I bit the inside of my cheek when Ellen asked how the surgery went.

"Good, I think. They got everything out. Now she waits to start treatment."

I kept my voice neutral: stating the facts. I hadn't expected my mother to say yes so easily when I'd offered to come in her place, when I'd said why not make it the whole summer—I could babysit, run errands, be someone for Ellen to talk to. Whatever she needs, I'd promised. I didn't want Ellen to start thinking maybe what she needed was to send me back.

"You're so lucky to be in Boston," she said. "Such good doctors there. You're lucky you caught it so soon."

I wasn't sure it felt that way to Jules. But I nodded, sure. "We're really lucky," I echoed dutifully, careful to keep my voice upbeat. "So where's Sabine?" My sister had been sleeping when I'd gone to say goodbye, and I wondered if she missed me. But I was so much older; our lives had barely overlapped. I wanted things to be different with my cousin this summer. My aunt would see I was ready, I was excited, I'd help out right from the start.

The silence stretched for so long that I finally glanced over and found Ellen staring—just staring—strangely, in the rearview mirror. But Sabine wasn't in the car seat, quietly napping. There was nothing back there but Ellen's oversized purse.

She must not have heard me change the subject. She must have been thinking about something else, something much more important, or she was just that thorough about checking in the mirror for cars. Call me naïve, but it was the only explanation I could come up with—the pause, that vacant look, her confusion followed by my own. I turned around as though I were the one who'd been mistaken. Until she cried, out of nowhere, "The pool! The pool, it's so gorgeous there, it's what sold us on the move—"

And then she was herself again, describing the club where Claudia had taken Sabine so I'd have time to get settled, and the spa, the tennis courts, the shrimp cocktail I was going to love.

"But your back is better?" I asked. Afraid of being rude, or too obvious, too *myself*, I flashed the kind of look my aunt and I used to share behind my mother's back, say, or when she'd sneak me a hard candy but didn't have another for Jules. "I won't make a big deal of it to my mom."

"The Maureen police." Her lipsticked mouth opened wide. Teeth, tongue, all of her went into the laugh. She reached over and squeezed my hand, I felt the bones and her rings and the line where her nail nicked my skin. "I'm great, sweetheart. And I promise your sister will be, too."

"I know," I said, because I had to believe it, and then the light changed, a car honked, and my aunt took back her hand to drive.

The house was high on a hill and set so far back it was as though the driveway were its own private street. You couldn't see it from the road, not with the trees and the stone ledge and the iron gate that required a code to unlock. The chimneys, plural, appeared first as we drove up, then the windows, the pillars, the red slab of a double front door. It had once been a girls' reformatory, and although Ellen had crowed to my mother about the changes they'd made, it still had that look, an institutionalized brick, like I'd been dropped into a nineteenth-century novel: the governess's tale.

"Wow," I said as we pulled up. And then, because Ellen was looking at me expectantly, as if waiting for more: "It's beautiful."

"It still needs so much work." She clucked her tongue. But I'd said the right thing, and she was pleased.

There was a field's worth of grass, a massive front yard sloping down to the road. At its base was a pond, not large enough to be a lake but really, it was something to have it on their property, an actual pond in front of their house. They never used the front entrance, Ellen said. Or the side entrance, which was the separate entryway into Claudia's suite. It was almost disappointing to drive all the way around to the back and discover just a regular door, a pot of geraniums that looked thirsty, but what did I know.

We used to go to their old apartment in Manhattan over the holidays, Jules and my parents and me, my uncle Stephen and his wife, Anita, and my three other cousins. Before Sabine was born, before they moved and got so busy with their renovations. In Manhattan, they'd had to unfold the leaves of their dining table to squeeze everyone in, but that wouldn't be a problem when they hosted us here. Ellen led me on a tour of the living room, sitting room, family room, parlor. Everywhere Sabine smiled out from tables, bookshelves, the mantels above each fireplace: laughing in the French countryside, eating gelato in Rome. I hadn't seen her since last Christmas, when the Corbins brought her to Cambridge and kept her in a Pack 'n Play in my room. Already in the recent pictures she looked more like a person, her hair gold in the sunlight, eyes a watery gray as though the color had been leached from her gaze. It was disarming how pretty she was, how much

prettier she'd wind up than me. I didn't want to think like that. But the measuring was automatic, the valuation of what mattered to me then.

I followed Ellen up polished wood stairs, past Sabine's bedroom, playroom, plus another guest room, bathroom, their bedroom, and then Laurent's study at the far end of the hall. "Which nobody needs to go into," she said, shutting the door before I caught more than brown leather and thick curtains behind. She led me on a steep climb to the third floor. I'd expected, I guess, more of the same, the rooms generous with furnishings, colors muted with just the right touch.

But the hallway was narrow and bare, nothing more than a small table with a portrait of my grandmother. Ellen herself seemed out of place as those snakeskin boots clipped past all the closed doors to the last closed door on the end. "I hope you like it," she chirped.

It smelled like old wood, a closed-in closet smell. There was only a dresser, a nightstand, a single chair sagging in a corner. Was this where she'd have stuck my mother for their *sister time*?

But I said the room was gorgeous, I was so happy I'd come. "I've missed you," I said. "I can't wait to see Sabine. And Claudia," I added, since she was the real babysitter, the one Ellen relied on the most. I didn't want Ellen to know how nervous I was about meeting her. Things hadn't gone well at the end of the school year and I couldn't shake the feeling that everyone hated me, which meant Claudia was going to hate me, too.

"Claudia's a godsend. But your mom's right, it'll be such a treat having you pitch in. Don't feel like you have to spend your whole summer taking care of us, though. We'll find a way to make it fun."

I nodded, smiled, hugged her again. Checked her gait as she turned and left—but there was no limp, no hitch, no telltale sign of anything once broken. Maybe she wasn't in pain anymore, and it was only the memory of pain, the betrayals of her body, that lingered these months later.

After she left, her footsteps echoing down the empty stairs, I unlatched the window and pushed it open, fighting against the swollen wood, its creaky resistance. The screen had a hole in it; dried ladybugs gathered on the

windowsill. But I wouldn't bother Ellen about it. I wouldn't bother anyone at all. "She's great," I told my mother when I called home to say I'd made it. "She's Ellen. She dressed like a supermodel just to come to the train."

Tell me if anything's wrong, she'd said. But *wrong* wasn't Ellen being late, or a little spacey, or putting me in a small room. Anyway, Jules had another appointment. My mother said that sounded just like Ellen and got off the phone. I'd done my job, then; I'd set her mind at ease.

I unpacked my T-shirts, shorts, and went exploring down the hall. The other rooms were even smaller, one with just a bed, others with no furniture at all. They had plans, Ellen had explained, to tear down walls. "Make it all feel less stuck." But that was for a later renovation, when Sabine had friends over and wanted more space. How many friends did they think one kid was going to have? If her social life went anything like mine, she'd just wind up rattling around on these empty floors, alone.

But I didn't ask that. And it didn't come to be—not the renovation, not the sleepovers, not the many giggling girls. By the end of that summer, media vans would already be camped out by the iron gate, sneaking shots of the mansion and its manicured grounds as everything was spruced up to sell. "They never should have bought such a place," I'd hear my mother lament to Uncle Stephen on the phone, and I'd wonder if she really thought that. If you could blame a house for what you'd done inside its walls.

TWO

By the time I figured I should come downstairs, start making myself useful, Claudia the godsend had come and gone. Sabine was sitting at the table, intent over a bowl of sliced grapes.

“Hi,” I said. “Do you remember me?” She stared up at me with those lake-gray eyes, then went back to her project. She was using her teeth to peel the skin, eating the outside in strips and discarding the viscera to leak on the table. “You going to eat those?” I asked.

“Grapes,” she answered, or something like that, it was hard to understand through the wet of her mouth, the smallness of her child’s voice. She extended a curl of skin to me.

“Thanks,” I said. I wondered what three-year-olds liked. What you were supposed to say to them. “That was really good sharing.” I took the slippery piece and put it on the counter. Ellen didn’t seem to notice the mess. She was humming and opening drawers, closing them like she’d forgotten what she was looking for. I tried to decide if this Ellen, shiny and unbothered, was the same Ellen my mother had been worried about. This Ellen said she wanted to show me the town. Was I up for it? Laurent was at the office.

“On a Sunday?” I popped a grape into my mouth, as if to show Sabine how it was done.

“It’s this project.” She banged a drawer shut. “He never should have gotten into real estate. I told him—”

She got Sabine's sandals, a little denim jacket too warm for the day. "Told him what?" I asked, when enough time had passed that I wasn't sure if she'd forgotten, or was checking to make sure I was listening, or maybe I was supposed to do more to help get Sabine out the door.

"The end of River Point has nothing, I mean honestly nothing there. A storage facility and a municipal lot. And it's right on the water! All that wasted land. Can you imagine? No, you can't, I'll take you—we'll drive by and you'll see how bleak it is."

I nodded. I had no idea what she was talking about. My uncle was a hedge fund manager, which as far as I could tell meant he made money for other people and that resulted in more money for himself.

"So what's the problem?" I asked. Sabine had stripped her jacket off, and I grabbed it from the floor to hang on the back of a chair. Unless Ellen wanted me to bring it? But she was picking up her keys and somehow misplacing them again, going on about zoning and permits and regulations that went back fifty years, a hundred. How it was enough to make you think the state didn't actually want a better business district, or attractive condos for people to live in, or a marina bigger than a postage stamp.

"You wouldn't believe the investors he's pulled in," she said knowingly. "But Laurent's always had vision." I nodded more, my head bobbing away. "It won't be an option for this goddamn state to say no."

Her voice dropped as she took Sabine's hand and we walked out to the car, all those grape skins still seeping on the table. I revised my earlier opinion. Not so shiny, then. Not all the way through.

I didn't mean to add to her problems. But at the bottom of the driveway, I told her to stop. Before the road—had it been there earlier? I was still thinking about my uncle, those investors, if you could really make Connecticut change its laws for you. But also, there was something in the pond.

"What, sweetie?" Ellen checked her lipstick while she waited for the gate to open.

"That." I pointed.

It was an antler. An antler was sticking up out of the water.

Ellen leaned over to peer through my window and I caught her scent again, something like pear. “Oh my god,” she said, finally seeing it. “Oh my god, oh my god.” She snapped upright in her seat, clutching the steering wheel tighter.

“I’ll go look,” I said, and opened the door.

The pond smelled of spongy ground and old, forgotten rot. There was a copse of trees, and from the road and the house the effect was bucolic, some perfect pastoral scene with the hill and the grass and the pond, hedges lining the driveway; a glimpse, across the road, of the next hill extending up. But maybe it only looked like that from far away; maybe up close everything was like this, the fetid water, the slippery rocks, the same way that, as she’d leaned over, I’d seen the layers where Ellen’s makeup clumped in her pores and along her lashes, making her look not luminous but cakey and strange.

The deer’s head lolled to the side. It must have been hit by a car and punched through the hedges before landing in the water. Its eyes were open—could it still be alive? But a river of blood ran from its nose, more gummed on its haunches and in the divot where its ribs had smashed. Up close I saw the antlers were new, young, softened by velvety down. One had cracked open and blood matted the velvet, pooling in the cup of split bone.

It should have been frightening. I heard it like a voice in my ear: *You should be afraid of this.*

But I stood there, looking. Looking for so long that I worried Ellen would wonder what was wrong with me. Earlier that year my best friends had stopped speaking to me, three bitchy dominoes falling in a row, and I felt the strangest kinship with that deer, that it knew me. That it knew from a place beyond knowledge what it was to be alone.

A flash of periwinkle caught my eye, and I turned to find Sabine racing toward me. Her car door was wide open, but my aunt was still sitting in the driver’s seat. I was the only thing standing between the girl and the road and the pond and the dark, gummy deer, and I saw all at once the terrible ways it could happen. A rock, a root. Tires screeching too late. What if she fell in the

water or ran through the open gate into the road? What if she saw all that blood?

Did Ellen know where she had gone?

The panic was raw, new. I must have had some kind of instinct after all. I ran to intercept her and picked her up under her armpits. She let out a yelp, as though I'd been too rough with her—

So I laughed. I laughed and twirled her in the grass, like it was only a game.

“You're such a fast runner!” I cried.

She wrapped her arms around my neck. “You went away.”

“Just for a minute, silly.” I was surprised by her sudden attachment, that she'd followed me at all. Surprised, too, by how flattering it was. “Let's go find your mom, okay?”

I carried her back, thinking Ellen was right. She wasn't so light anymore.

My aunt called through the window: “Sabine?” The way she said it and looked over her shoulder, searching, I knew the answer to my question. She hadn't let Sabine out of the car.

Had she known Sabine could undo her buckles? Open the door? “Aunt Ellen,” I started, sliding into the passenger seat once Sabine was secured. But I'd only just arrived; I couldn't sound too critical.

“What is it?” She craned to look through the window. “Did you see?”

I said, treading carefully: “I should remember to keep an eye out, right? If Sabine won't stay in the back seat?”

“Do you need me to go look?”

“No, it's not that. But Sabine—”

“We've had so much to do with the house, I've barely started on the landscaping down here.”

I should have pushed harder. I should have made her focus.

“It's dead,” I finally told her. “It's a dead deer.”

“Dead deer,” Sabine echoed from the back seat, and I wondered if she knew what that word meant. If I'd overreacted by trying to shield her. If I

was overreacting now. Ellen wasn't worried, and Ellen knew children better than I did. She knew her own child best of all.

"Sorry," I said. "I don't think she saw it, though."

"I'd better call Laurent."

She dialed on the car phone. The Corbins were the first people I'd known to get one. My uncle's voice through the speaker as he answered was nothing like I remembered, or maybe I didn't know how I remembered it. People could change, after all, in not a lot of time.

"What is it?" he said, quick, even his voice agile, no time to waste on hellos.

"There's a deer," Ellen said. "There's a dead deer in the pond. Here, can you—"

She was driving by now, one hand waving, and I realized she was pointing me toward Sabine, who had picked up on her father's voice and was shouting, "Papa, Papa!" from the back seat.

"Hey, little strawberry." I reached around and grabbed Sabine's toes through her sandals, whispering: "Mama's on the phone."

I wiggled her foot. She giggled and kicked, so I unbuckled my seatbelt to reach the other one, grabbing with little gobbling noises in the back of my throat. She laughed harder, and I couldn't believe that those feet belonged to a person, that the skin could be so soft, that this was all it took for her to like me.

"It's in the pond and it's dead," Ellen was saying. We hit a turn and my stomach lurched with it, but I didn't let go.

"What are you telling me for?" Laurent's voice crackled through the speaker. Ellen explained it all over again, her voice rising, until he cut her off. "Call someone to get rid of it. I'm meeting Harry at Belle's, you know I can't be late."

Ellen said who, who was she supposed to call for a thing like that, what was she supposed to do with a dead deer in the pond, and my chest turned hot with shame. That Laurent would talk to her this way. That she could be so put together, so perfectly coiffed, and also so foolish.