SLEEP

A Novel

HONOR JONES

"INCREDIBLY MOVING." —ANN PATCHETT

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Honor Jones

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IT WAS DAMP DOWN UNDER the blackberry bush, but Margaret liked it there; she was cozy, like a rabbit. It smelled clean—it was funny how dirt could smell so clean. She couldn't see in the dark which berries were ripe, but she nibbled on one anyway, puckered, spat. She rested her cheek against her arm and looked across the yard.

A whoop and a stampede—the boys were running by. They must have spotted Biddy. The bright spot of the flashlight whirled. It made her dizzy trying to follow it. Hammock, grass, basketball net, grass. The flashlight made a photograph each time it hit something—little circles of backyard, punched out of time.

The light lit the door of the toolshed and stayed there, wobbling. She couldn't tell which boy was which in the dark, but one held the flashlight, one went for the door. Tactics, she thought, impressed. They shouted and knocked over some rakes and buckets, but the shed was empty.

Margaret laughed into her elbow. The boys stopped to scheme, and she could see that Danny was holding the flashlight. Danny was her best friend's brother, and so they could almost certainly never fall in love and get married. The boys were making a plan; they had to be more strategic, she could hear Neal, her own brother, saying.

She played with a stick in the dirt, making up signs for the fairy people who would come out later, telling them who she was: *Here lay Margaret, child of man*. The fairies would have tangles in their hair and see-through wings of dusky violet and the pointed toes of Barbies. She didn't believe in fairies, but she liked to pretend.

The light came again, straight into the blackberry bush. For a second it was like being inside a room when someone flicks the switch. The world got

solid and sharp-edged and jumped at her—leaves and thorns and shadows of thorns, the dirt so close to her face and suddenly, specifically, dirty. She cringed her eyes shut tight so no one could see them shining like an animal's. When she opened them again the boys were on the other side of the yard.

They'd given up on the ground and were looking into the trees. Biddy would be in a tree, Margaret could have told them that. And it took only a few more minutes before the light found her, pinned her up against the branches. Biddy kicked her sneakers like she didn't care and swung down to the victorious brothers.

But they would never find Margaret. She had known as soon as she burrowed down under the blackberries that no one was going to find her. She was too low to the ground, too good and hidden.

It was fully dark out now. She couldn't see the bats against the sky anymore, the bats that lived in the attic and weren't all bad because they ate the mosquitoes. If she was outside after her own dinner, looking up, she could catch them sometimes sluicing out of the house, so many wings so close together it was like one streaming body, like the house was a factory churning out black smoke. They were up there, eating, but she couldn't see them. She tried pretending them away, but that never worked; you could pretend things into existence but not out of it.

The damp had soaked through her shorts and she shivered. She was bored of flashlight tag. Elbowing her way out from under the brambles, she shouted, "I win, I win," and linking arms with Biddy, skipped toward the lit-up house.

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THE PARENTS WERE on the porch, around the glass table. "Ice cream's inside," Biddy's mom, Mrs. Murphy, called to the oncoming children.

"Bring me a bowl too, would you?" Margaret's dad asked her. The fathers were handsome in their off-hours polo shirts, but Margaret's father was handsomer. And in the doorway her mother in the hot pink sundress—Elizabeth, commanding the screen. Elizabeth oversaw the children tramping

through, but when Margaret reached the threshold, she put an arm out and stopped her.

"You're filthy," she said.

Margaret looked at her mother's face to see how she meant it. But it was safe, she didn't look angry; she looked as if she was thinking of a cute word, like *ragamuffin*. She glanced down at her T-shirt and jean shorts. They were smeared with dirt and her knees were brown, but filthy? Elizabeth was always exaggerating. Besides, this was clean dirt, blackberry dirt. She toed off the heels of her sneakers and lined them up beside the door the way she was supposed to. She said, "I'm not filthy."

A mistake. Dumb, Margaret. "You are literally," Elizabeth said, "covered in mud."

I'm not, she thought again but did not say.

"Look at yourself."

Elizabeth pinched at her T-shirt as if she had to touch it but didn't want to. The shirt lifted away from her chest and the air came in. "Take your clothes off here and give them to me. I don't want you tracking that mess through the house."

Margaret looked around the porch, at the Murphys, at Danny on the other side of the door. "Here?"

"Don't be a princess."

Elizabeth took the hem of her T-shirt and pulled. Automatically Margaret's arms went up, like she was still a little kid who was used to being undressed by her mother. The shirt covered her face, and for a moment it was safe, she was back in the blackberry bush, in the good dark, but then the air was on her. Elizabeth had said she'd buy Margaret a training bra when she started fifth grade that fall. She didn't need it for support or anything yet, but you could see that she would soon; you could see already that she wasn't a child or a boy. "Skin a rabbit," Elizabeth said, reaching for her shorts.

Then Margaret was through the door and up the stairs in her white underwear, moving fast so she couldn't see anyone seeing her. Behind her,

Elizabeth was her good mother again, bundling up the dirty laundry, saying to the other kids, still gathered by the door, “Don’t forget to put the ice cream back in the freezer. I don’t want ichor all over the countertop.”

“Don’t want what now?” she heard her father asking.

Icker? Margaret repeated the word as she climbed up on the bathroom sink, contorting her knees under the tap. It was a new word. Ick, ick, icker. It meant filthy too, she guessed. Her mother had many words for that, and she was right: Margaret was filthy. The dirt ran down the sink in pleasing long brown lines. But Elizabeth wasn’t mad that she was filthy; she was mad that Margaret had said she wasn’t filthy. Icker on the countertop, she said to herself, liking the sound of the words.

There was no lock on the bathroom door. There were no locks on any of the doors. Elizabeth had always been afraid, when Margaret and Neal were little, that they would lock themselves inside, that it would happen during an emergency, such as a fire, that locks were therefore a fire hazard. When they’d first moved into the big house, Elizabeth had replaced all the hardware on the doors with matching antique latches—each had a handle of black iron the length of a grown-up’s fist and on top of that a tongue you pressed with your thumb. Margaret liked the way the latches rattled into place, but she didn’t see why they couldn’t have normal doors that locked like other people’s did.

Sometimes Margaret would push the dirty laundry basket in front of the bathroom door. The room was quieter when no one else could get inside. She would perch on the counter and look at parts of her face really close in the mirror. Or take her shirt off and turn from side to side. Biddy’s nipples were a pale ballerina pink, but hers were much darker, almost brown, an ugly color. It meant her boobs, when she got them, would be bigger—that’s what Biddy said. But then one time she heard footsteps and the latch jumped up and down—Elizabeth, trying to get in. She’d had to ram her shoulder hard against the door to push it open. Why should Margaret want to lock her own family out? She got in major trouble for that. That was a big, big fire hazard.

A few weeks earlier they'd all gone to Biddy's house for dinner. The summer nights were like this: backyard, burgers, ice cream, repeat. That night she and Biddy had been playing with Barbies in the basement—they were too old for pretend, so they played with Barbies only in the basement, furtively—when her mother plunged down the steps and pinned Margaret against the wall.

She was yelling something. The yelling wasn't words, it was more physical than that—like the hands clamped around her arms, and the wall knock-knocking at the back of her head, and all over and around it the good-mother smell of sunscreen and Lubriderm lotion that always announced *Elizabeth*.

It was Biddy's brother, Danny, who stopped it. He stood on the stairs, saying, "But wait, it was us. We did it. It was us." He had to shout before anyone noticed. Elizabeth dropped Margaret, looked at Danny, and turned and walked past him up the stairs.

When she was gone, Danny crouched down and told Margaret and Biddy what had happened. The brothers had been making prank calls from the phone in Biddy's parents' bedroom, and some lady had reverse-dialed, tattled to the parents. She had loved Danny long before that night, but she loved him extra now. Not even the dads would stand up to Elizabeth.

Upstairs they could hear the grown-ups laughing, that shouting laughter grown-ups do. "They really thought they'd got away with it," Mr. Murphy was saying. "For a year, in every boardroom on Wall Street." The snorting sound of female disbelief.

"Come on," Danny said. "Let's see if there's dessert."

For the rest of the night she had tried to read Elizabeth's face to see what she was thinking. Was she sorry too? But there was nothing to read—the anger had passed and been replaced; she had on her grown-up-conversation face, then her doing-the-dishes face, then her no-whining, it's-time-to-go face. If the boys got a talking-to, Margaret and Biddy didn't see it.

But why had Elizabeth thought Margaret had done it? The kids were always talking about superpowers—if you could have any superpower, what would it be? Margaret usually said mind reading. But what if she could read her mother's mind, and all her mother was thinking was that Margaret was bad, bad, bad? Better say flying instead.

NOW SHE WRAPPED a towel around her waist and started to leave the bathroom. She needed to get new clothes. She needed to go downstairs and eat ice cream. Biddy would be waiting for her; Biddy was sleeping over. But she stopped at the door and came back. Carefully, with wet toilet paper, she wiped everything down, each thing she'd touched: the sink, the hot tap and the cold, the honey-colored marble that she'd sat on. She had turned the bar of soap brown. Under the clear water she cleaned the soap itself.

2

DAWN HEAVED UP, THE SUN just visible through the window. She turned her head. Biddy was on her side with a hand under her cheek and a stripe of hair across her mouth. One of the rules of their best friendship was that they always woke at the exact same time. They wanted everything to happen to them at the same time.

Their parents had been close forever, but Margaret and Biddy liked to think they would have been best friends even if their parents had spoken different languages or come from warring tribes. The boys got along because Danny got along with everyone, but it was in Margaret and Biddy that the bond had been perfected. They had napped together, traded pacifiers, caught the same fevers, bit each other when angered, thrown what must have been terrifying simultaneous tantrums of which they now felt very proud. Once Biddy had said her stomach hurt and Margaret had run to the bathroom and barfed. It was the meat loaf, but they made it part of their mythology. They knew where the other family kept the snacks and silverware and precisely how much patience each parent could be trusted to extend.

Over spring break Margaret had gone on a plane for the first time, to England. Her dad had been promoted, and the children were old enough to appreciate travel. So once a year, Elizabeth said, they would go somewhere enriching, just as she had done with her parents when she was a girl. When Margaret got back, Biddy had refused to listen to a single thing about the trip. If she so much as mentioned tea or castles, Biddy gave her the silent treatment. This was only fair. Margaret had felt the same way when Biddy went to the Six Flags near Trenton with her swim team. Jealous—jealous of the unshared experience.

Every new thing that happened to you changed you; you couldn't take it back. When they were younger, they sometimes got their mothers to dress them in the same outfit, like twins. They wouldn't try that now—it would only draw attention to how different Biddy was from her, how much more concrete, with her curls and her girl-athlete's body. But they had discussed, endlessly, the training bras, how they would wear them on the first day of school.

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SHE ROLLED AWAY and then back, coughed, shut her eyes. Then she opened them. And there was Biddy, awake on her separate pillow, looking at her. She waited another second so they could say "pancakes" simultaneously.

Downstairs, the comfort of the kitchen, implements and ingredients all sensibly arranged: spices in the spice drawer, knives in the knife block, mixing bowls nested by diminishing diameter, the cloudy bottles of vinegar and oil. They stared at the Bisquick for a while, hoping Margaret's dad would come down and mix it like he had when they were littler. But they were almost in fifth grade now; they could do it themselves.

They got the stove on, and the butter melted in a skillet. They spooned the batter into circles, poked at the edges with the spatula. The sizzle burned the night away, burned it up in the hot, solid clattering elements of the morning.

"Girls!" Around the corner came Margaret's father, already dressed in another white polo. He palmed the top of her head in his direction and glanced a kiss. "Cooking," he said. "Enough for me?"

He picked a golden one off the stack with a fork, and raw batter oozed up around the tines. "Leave this to the professionals," he said. They were pleased. They considered their fathers' pancakes a tribute to them—the only thing they cooked that wasn't meat. He took over the skillet, turned down the flame, slipped the half-cooked pancakes back onto the heat. "Everybody sleep okay? No bumps in the night?"

"Where's Mom?" she asked.

"Your mother's not feeling well."

So it was one of those days.

Her mouth was full of pancake when her brother, Neal, walked in—Neal with Jane the cat in his arms. He was petting the cat, running his hand down her back and over her tail. It bothered Margaret, though she didn't know why; there was nothing obscene about it. And Jane was purring.

"Morning, Dad," he said.

"Help yourself," their father said. "But could you not pet the cat at the table?"

Neal dumped her to the floor.

Anyone who looked at Neal and Margaret knew they were brother and sister, and yet people talked about Neal being handsome and they did not talk about her being pretty. Maybe her features worked better on a boy, or maybe, at thirteen, he had just grown into them better. Almost all grown-ups admired Neal. He was like a grown-up himself, in the way that he always knew how to be polite. Other kids teased him, which made the grown-ups like him more. It seemed to Margaret that it was Neal's fault he didn't have more friends, but old people seemed to disagree, seemed to think that the kids in their ignorance were missing some rare quality. Elizabeth loved him more because he was so unlikable. That was just the kind of thing that mothers did.

The girls finished and ran hot water over their plates, sticky with the fake syrup's sweet chemicals. A click and a whoosh and the AC switched on, and Mrs. Murphy honked from the driveway.

AFTER BIDDY LEFT, Margaret went upstairs to Elizabeth with a plate of pancakes like it was Mother's Day. She'd had the idea to pour the syrup into an egg cup so the pancakes wouldn't get soggy, and she was proud of this, of how careful she'd been, and of the goblet of amber nectar that rippled as she walked.

She loved her mother's bedroom, how it was as fancy and formal as the dining room downstairs, with no mess or clutter, no clothes thrown over the

back of a chair, no pocket junk on the dresser. There was a satin bedspread in robin's-egg blue that Elizabeth didn't even use as a blanket, just folded down to the foot of the bed each night. On the dresser were treasures: a silver mirror and a silver comb; a shallow bowl clinking with cuff links; an obelisk of perfume. Anything small and delicate and precious to her mother was irresistible to Margaret, and sometimes she was allowed to pick these things up and look at them, and sometimes she was not. But she must never touch the glass box at the center. It locked with a miniature key like for a girl's diary, and inside were the antique dueling pistols her parents had given each other one anniversary. A gold plaque on top read—romantically, worryingly—

Hugh and Elizabeth
'til death do us part.

Her mother was in bed; the room was dark. Margaret put the plate on the dresser and climbed up next to her. "Mom?" She touched her shoulder, then lifted her hand off, touched and lifted. "Mom, are you asleep?"

"Hello, my darling."

"I brought you breakfast."

"Is it late?"

"Pretty late."

Elizabeth rolled over and propped herself half up against the pillows, rubbing her face with her hands. "Hand me my robe."

Margaret bounced down and lifted the robe off the hook on the inside of the closet door. It was so fine and silky, touching it was like touching her mother's skin.

"How was the sleepover?"

"Fun."

"Have you done your chores?"

"I'm going to."

Margaret looked at the novels stacked on her mother's side of the bed. They were all about English girls who worked in bookstores during the war, or about English girls who worked as nurses during the war, or about Italian girls who fell in love with dukes. She hoped Elizabeth wouldn't tell her to go.

Almost a year ago, Elizabeth had stayed in bed for days and days. She had taken too many pills one morning after the kids went to school, Margaret knew, because Elizabeth had told her. She had explained all about it one morning, the two of them sitting in bed as if at story time.

"Sometimes you have to do something extreme so people understand how much pain you're in," Elizabeth had said. *People* meant Dad. It was because of The Affair. Elizabeth used capital letters to talk about it, and so Margaret and Neal did too. Their father did not talk about it at all, though he was the one who'd done it, had it—The Affair.

But Margaret hadn't entirely understood if the pills were somehow an accident—if maybe Elizabeth had been so upset that she'd gotten confused and eaten a big handful of pills instead of something else, some normal food, like popcorn. It was Neal who told her no: that Elizabeth had done it on purpose because Elizabeth had wanted to die. He had turned off the TV to tell her that. He hadn't cried, so she didn't either. "You can't tell anyone," he'd told her. "Not even Biddy."

Elizabeth said their father went away because he was a coward. Neal said he'd come back soon. Their mother stayed in the bedroom. It was much easier to keep the secret than she'd thought it would be. Mrs. Murphy came to check on them. She would stop by in the afternoons, put a casserole or pizza on the counter, disappear upstairs. Three times she picked them up and took them to the swimming pool, where they played sharks and minnows with Biddy and Danny.

"Okay, guys?" she would say when she dropped them back off in the driveway. And to Neal: "Take good care of your sister."

Eventually someone must have called their dad's sister Aunt Daphne, because she drove up from Delaware and took them to stay with her for a week or two. When Aunt Daphne brought them home again, school was