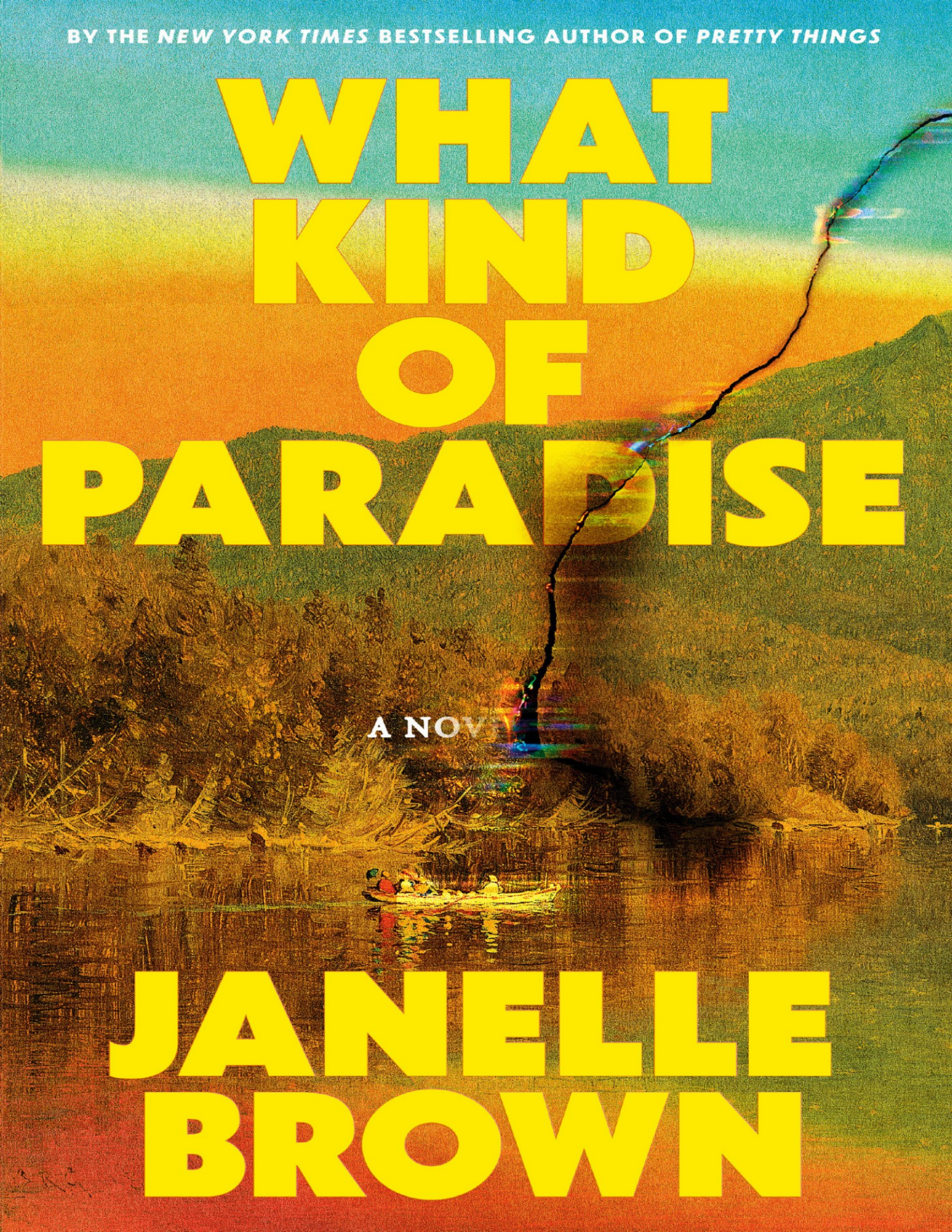


BY THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF PRETTY THINGS

WHAT KIND OF PARADISE

The background is a painting of a river scene. In the foreground, a small boat with several people is on the water. The river is surrounded by dense, dark trees and foliage. In the background, there are mountains under a sky with a rainbow. A bright lightning bolt strikes a tree on the right side of the river, creating a dramatic effect. The overall color palette is warm, with yellows, oranges, and greens.

A NOVEL

JANELLE BROWN

ALSO BY JANELLE BROWN

All We Ever Wanted Was Everything

This Is Where We Live

Watch Me Disappear

Pretty Things

I'll Be You

WHAT KIND
of PARADISE

A Novel

JANELLE BROWN



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*To the Tiredlings and Salonistas
who changed the trajectory of my life*

He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Prologue

THE KNOCK I'D been waiting for finally happened early on a normal Monday morning, not long after my daughter left for school. It came almost as a relief. There she was, the stranger at the door who I'd been afraid of for so long: a woman maybe fifteen years younger than me, a rumpled linen blazer that advertised seriousness of intent, ergonomic sneakers tapping nervously at the planks of my porch, black hair yanked into a crooked ponytail.

How many strange knocks at the door had I heard over the previous decades? Each one accompanied by a corresponding knock in my chest, a surge of my pulse: *I've been found*. I didn't get many solicitors out where we lived, in the winding woodlands of Marin, but people sometimes made their way to me anyway. Neighbor kids selling raffle tickets, a particularly persistent Environment California fundraiser, real estate agents wondering if I was willing to list my covetable acreage. I ignored the strangers, answered the door when it was children, hid in the back when it was a man.

So why did I answer this particular knock? Why did I drift toward the entry, the cereal spoon from my breakfast still in my hand, impulsively compelled to open the door?

Probably I had felt the global temperature shift, despite my attempts to disregard it. Once you're aware of something's existence, you can't will it back into oblivion, no matter how hard you try. Or maybe some long-buried voice from deep inside me had sent up a smoke signal: *It's time*.

Gus was barking like a maniac, claws scrabbling at the door. I grabbed his collar as I twisted the doorknob and peered at the woman standing there,

her laptop bag heavy across her thigh.

“Hi, I’m Yasmin Amadi. *San Francisco Chronicle*?” She had an eager squeak in her voice, her breath came fast even as she tried to keep her face calm. She stuck her hand out, a business card in her palm.

I stared down at it, at the fingernails chewed to the quick and the string bracelet on her wrist. I gripped Gus’s collar tighter, forcing him to sit. “Sorry, but what’s this about?”

“Is this you?” She held out a piece of paper with a sketch of me that I’d hoped I’d never see again. Her eyes scrutinized my face, and I could sense her measuring me up against my teenage self: noting the gray now threading the blond, the wrinkles that split my forehead like a cracked windshield, my nearsighted squint from too many hours staring at close objects. I could tell that she was looking for something in particular, could see the question mark in her eyes as she failed to find it. A renegade air, maybe. A criminal mien. But all she could see was a faded middle-aged lady with paint in her hair. It was possible she was questioning herself.

I could have answered no. Could have hidden behind the new name I’d given myself, the carefully constructed smoke screens I’d thrown up years before. Names are easy to slip on and off, like an ill-fitting suit. I’ve gone through so many. Personal identity, however—that’s a whole different story. Identity is far harder to change.

I closed my eyes. Behind my lids I saw the same familiar ghosts flicker past, my life’s movie on perpetual rerun. Blood spatters across a shiny red dress. The cold heft of a gun in my palm. A tower of flames, bright against the night sky.

“How did you find me?” I asked. Gus panted obediently at my feet, drool dripping on my bare toes.

To her credit, she didn’t grin in victory. Instead, she bit her lip apologetically, clearly aware of just how much effort I had put into *not* being found. “A lot of research. It took a few months to connect the dots, piece together clues. And the internet was very helpful, of course.”

“Of course,” I repeated. Because the internet was how it had all begun. It had undone me, made me whole again, and then undone me once more. My savior, my nemesis, the harbinger of doom for us all.

“Considering everything that’s happening, I thought maybe you’d want to talk to the press?”

“Everything that’s happening?”

Her eyes opened wide, a little patronizing. “Oh. Maybe you aren’t aware that your father has been in the news lately—maybe you don’t have a television?” I wondered if she was thinking that after so many years of trying to escape my father’s legacy, I had somehow ended up rebuilding his Arcadia.

“I’m aware,” I interrupted her. I pointed the cereal spoon over my shoulder, to clarify. She glanced past me for the first time, noting the interior of our little cedar-lined house: the paintings that hung on every wall, little clay figures teetering on ledges, the novels flung open on the couch. Signs of a teenager, scattered shoes and clothes, abandoned breakfast plates. But also: a desk with a full computer setup and a television that was currently on mute.

“In that case, maybe you’d like to set the record straight,” she persisted. “You haven’t ever told your full story, not since it all went down.”

“Thanks, but when it’s time for me to tell my story, I’ll do it myself. Please leave.”

I released Gus’s collar and he leapt happily at Yasmin, clambering up her thighs. She backed away, wiping off the drool on her slacks, then turned and walked to her car. I felt a little bad—she seemed nice enough. Smart and persistent, which would probably take her far. But I also knew that she was facing a futile task: How could an hourlong conversation with a reporter possibly capture the complexity of the story I had to tell? After all, the dichotomies of my childhood were a subject that even *I* struggled to wrap my head around: All these years later, I still wasn’t sure I fully understood what had happened.

But as I turned back from the door, I found myself thinking of my daughter. She was almost the age that I had been when everything began; and her gaze was starting to settle on the territories beyond her familiar borders. I knew that for her sake—if not my own—it might finally be time for me to try.

Part One

JANE

THE FIRST THING that you have to understand is that my father was my entire world. It had been that way since I was four and my mother died, leaving us alone together. Not alone in the typical bereaved-family sense, but truly *alone*, as in, just us two living out in the wilderness together. As a child, I had no understanding that our lives were not normal—it was simply the way things were. Our cabin, our forest, our woodstove surrounded by our towering piles of books and newspapers, and our potatoes that we dug out of our vegetable garden and roasted in the coals. My father, his long brown hair shot with gray, the side of his hand permanently smudged with ink, his worn-soft shirts with holes right where the fabric rubbed against his belt. His hugs, which smelled of smoke and the mint sprigs that he chewed.

There were so many things that were said about my father later, so many portraits that weren't at all accurate; but one thing that everyone felt the need to acknowledge was that he was very intelligent. A mind as sharp and bright and piercing as a nail. Think, *Mensa-level genius*.

Growing up, I sometimes thought I could hear his mind fizzing and popping, dendrites of connection whirring in his brain, an electric buzz coming off him that was almost audible in its intensity. I felt small around him: a dim bulb compared to his incandescent filaments. I read the books he put before me, tried to formulate arguments that would impress him; and even though he would nod and smile as I stumbled my way through Nietzsche or Goethe or Baudrillard, I always feared that I was letting him down.

He never let me forget that he was an extraordinary man, either. “They didn’t know what to do with me at Harvard. Got three degrees in four years—engineering and mathematics and philosophy—and I wanted to get one more in history, but it was money I didn’t have.” “I quit a high-profile job after I exposed the underlying flaw in their thinking and they didn’t want to listen.” “I could have gotten sixteen patents for inventions, but I walked away from all of them because I didn’t want to deal with the government bureaucracy of it all.”

The subtext, of course, was that there were so many things he could have done, but he chose *me* over all of them. He chose *me*, and preserving my future, over his own blinding success. He’d given all that up to move us to the woods, so he could raise me in an Edenic paradise. That was how much he loved me.

How could I not trust that?

So yes, I grew up fully aware that my father was a brilliant man whose expertise I should never ever question.

Did I believe that he was a *good* man? That’s another question entirely.

—

HE WASN’T *WITHOUT* goodness. When I think of him now—that is, when I try to remember the father I revered, not the man from the news—I often find myself reaching back to a March day when I was fourteen. My father shook me awake at dawn and told me that we were out of food and the snowstorms had made the roads impassable, so we were going to go hunt a deer. It wasn’t hunting season, but that didn’t bother my father a bit. He wasn’t about to let the government tell him how to conduct his business on his land; and though the forest wasn’t *technically* our land (our property was a small patch of woods-adjacent scrubland), my father certainly knew it better than anyone else.

And so off we went at dawn, my father's loaded rifle tossed over his shoulder, both of us bundled up in old Army Navy parkas. Snow started falling as we trudged through the drifts. I remember trying to fit my feet into my father's footsteps as we walked single file through the trees; and the effort it took me to fit my short girl's stride into his long man's one. Our breath formed clouds in the air, froze ice crystals into my scarf. I could see my father's head turning right and left, looking for signs. I kept following his gaze into the depths of the trees, and saw nothing.

And then he stopped so fast that I almost bumped into him. He pointed one finger up at the sky, signaling me to pay attention, and then he slowly lifted the Remington and fitted it to his shoulder. There in the path, less than twenty feet in front of us, was a magnificent buck, with at least twelve points on his rack. The deer wasn't a young one; but he wasn't old yet, either. His flank was crossed with violent-looking scars; his haunches quivered with muscle; the fur under his muzzle was matted with icicles. He looked like a creature that had just survived an epic quest from a Jules Verne story.

He stared at us. We stared at him. No one moved.

I braced myself, waiting for the rifle shot. But it didn't come. Instead, my father slowly let the rifle slip in his hands until it was pointed at the ground. And then I heard an unexpected sound: the soft huff of my father's tears.

My father never cried.

"Go on," he said to the deer; and his voice in the silent forest was shockingly loud. "Better you than us."

"*Dad!*" I objected in a whisper, already anticipating a familiar knot of hunger. My father hunted only once or twice a year, and only on these late-winter days when our food stores were empty and the roads were still unplowed. Without venison, I knew that all we would have to eat was oatmeal mush and canned beans and the last of the frozen potatoes in our storage shed.

My father ignored me. So did the buck. They stared at each other, and something seemed to pass between them, two battle-scarred veterans of life. The needles of the pine trees, swaying in the wind, seemed to be whispering