

A DOG IN GEORGIA

A NOVEL

Lauren Grodstein

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<u>ONE</u>

NEW YORK

ONE

THE WOMAN—LONG GRAY COAT, enormous scarf—scuttled toward Amy just as she and Roxy were leaving the dog run in Tompkins Square Park. It was another blue morning in an unseasonably blue February.

"Hey!" the woman called. She had a vaguely familiar face, and for a second Amy thought she was a student—but no, she generally remembered her students. Or maybe someone from the neighborhood?

Or did she work at the restaurant? She had a tired, reedy voice.

"Excuse me! Hey!" the woman called again.

It was so early, though—not even seven-thirty, and restaurant people generally didn't wake up this early. Amy and Roxy had just finished their morning kibbitz with the regulars: Rufus the Lab, Jazz the mutt, Morty the half-blind pit bull.

"I'm sorry," the woman said, when she was close enough to Amy to be heard over the whine of rush hour and dogs barking inside their oval run. "I have to tell you something."

"Me?"

"Something terrible." The woman had an enormous tote bag on her shoulder spilling over with scarves, leaflets, bits of fabric. "I'm really sorry."

Amy was too tired for this; she hadn't slept the night before. "I'm not interested," she said. "Whatever you're selling."

"No," the woman said. "It's your dog. She's yours, right?"

WHO ELSE'S COULD SHE BE? Roxy, kind-hearted rescue, smallish German shepherd, the worst defense imaginable against thieves or crazy people. She stepped toward the woman for a pat on the head.

"She's sweet," the woman said, obliging.

"Can I help you?" Amy tugged on Roxy's leash. *Heel, girl*. But Roxy was blissed out from the woman's attention, leaning up against her skinny legs.

"I'm just—I hate to tell you this. I'm sorry—I always hate telling people. But your dog is about to—you see, I'm kind of a pet psychic." The woman said this gently, rubbing the sweet spot in the middle of Roxy's bony head. "And I think you need to know that your dog is miserable."

"Excuse me?" Amy straightened, offended.

"No, I'm sorry—not miserable, exactly. Just, like, kind of lost. Kind of directionless."

"She's a dog," Amy said. "That's not a way a dog can feel."

"Actually, it is," the woman said. "It might sound crazy, but I've always had a true connection with animals. I know what they're thinking. Like their deepest emotions."

"Okay, but in fact," Amy said, tugging harder on Roxy's leash, "that's impossible."

"It's been my curse since I was a child," the woman said. She smiled ruefully, and Amy could see a swipe of maroon lipstick on her teeth. "Sometimes people think I'm crazy."

I think you're crazy, but Amy kept it to herself.

"Anyway, something truly metamorphic is coming for her, but it's going to be very difficult. Very heavy. I think she knows it, too," the woman said. She switched her massive tote bag to her other arm. "You can tell by the way she walks, her gait. Something needs to be fixed. Please don't ignore it."

"Nothing needs to be fixed," Amy said. "She walks fine. When did you even see her walk? We've been at the dog park since six-thirty—"

"I've been watching you all morning," the woman said, and this was when Amy blinked. *Run, girl!* She must have said it out loud, because Roxy took off like a jet, pulling Amy with her, the leash taut, and even as they ran she checked Roxy's hips and her gait was *fine*, thank you, and when they were fifty yards away, the edge of Tompkins Square Park, Amy turned around.

The woman had disappeared.

A bad dream. Insanity. Roxy was panting.

"Roxy," Amy said. "Roxy girl. What the hell was that?"

She sat down on a bench, and Roxy sat at her feet. (Gently, not in pain). She looked around again: students and commuters and dogs and their owners and joggers. Two cops. She knew it made her a bad liberal but Amy felt better once she saw the cops.

The woman had not reemerged, and Amy thought that this was what a sleepless night could do to a person in middle age. Waking nightmares! Hallucinations!

"You want to go home, Rox?"

Roxy looked at Amy with a cocked eyebrow. She was a dog. Where they went wasn't up to her.

"Do you?"

Roxy shrugged her body downward, rested her heavy head on her paws.

"Do you feel miserable? Lost? Directionless?"

The dog yawned.

Sometimes after the park Amy and Roxy would walk to Union Square, especially if the Greenmarket was on, or sometimes they would stop for breakfast at Veselka, or sometimes they would go home and Amy would work on whatever small projects she had created for herself for the day. There was less and less to do, really. She wasn't teaching anything this semester. She didn't have any new writing assignments. No invitations, no appointments, no openings.

Ferry was at school. She could barely even look at Judd. The cats would be sloshing around in the kitchen sunshine like drunks.

"I kind of want a drink," Amy said to Roxy. "But I guess it's too early."

Still, when they got back to the apartment she checked to see if there was any open Scotch, and there was, and she poured that into the coffee that was in the coffee maker from the day before and she microwaved the two together and glugged in some hazelnut Coffeemate and sat down at the kitchen table and took a sip that was disgusting.

Light streamed in, oppressively, through the wavy casement windows. Their building had been a factory one hundred years ago—or okay, a sweatshop, immigrant girls producing umbrella frames sixteen hours a day. But eventually the girls got married and manufacturing moved to the boroughs, and the building survived intact through midcentury abandonment and 1970s squalor before finally succumbing to a bourgeois rehab in the early nineties: brick walls, hardwood floors, original windows and radiators, high ceilings. In 1994, twelve years before they'd met, Judd had had the foresight to purchase one with his parents' money.

He'd also had the foresight to purchase a former crack den on Tenth and A, also with his parents' money, and turn it into Le Coin (pronounced "Le Kwahnh," in the French way), where crowds still gathered most weeknights and all day weekends to eat oysters and drink champagne. Amy and Judd had first laid eyes on each other in Le Coin's sweltering kitchen one Wednesday in November 2006. She'd come in to apply for a job on the line, and in the way of these things a line cook had no-showed that very morning.

"You can cook?"

The first thing he'd said to her.

"I can," she said. He handed her an apron and a hairnet and she got to work.

When they got married at City Hall two years later, Ferry and Jorge, the dishwasher, were their only witnesses. They honeymooned at Le Coin, which was where they liked to be anyway.

And over the years his apartment had become their apartment, his child their child, his life her life, his indiscretions her heartbreak.

Her mother had asked her, was she sure? He has so many—tattoos. And Bernstein? Is he—

Yes, Mom, Jewish.

Well, her mother sighed. I do hear they treat their wives nicely.

Amy poured more Scotch into her coffee, wiped some crumbs off the table onto the floor for Roxy to lick up. Like many restaurant professionals, Judd rarely cooked at home, but still he'd fixed up their kitchen little by little whenever they'd had extra cash: upgrading the stove to a Viking 6 (almost too wide to fit in the freight elevator), installing John Boos butcher block counters and a secondhand La Marzocco espresso maker. She used to love to cook there.

But now, eyeing it through her weariness, Amy saw a half-cocked kitchen that remembered it had once been a sweatshop. Piles of recycling gathered around the espresso maker, and daisies wilted in a tomato can on the windowsill. Pet food was scattered about the floors; they were all sloppy eaters in this house. The kitchen table was scratched from endless breakfasts and craft projects and Ferry's grade school homework.

The scent of high-octane kitty litter wafted through one door; Judd's snores wafted through another.

The loud snoring was new. She had read that it could be a sign of heart trouble, or was it that snoring could cause heart trouble? Judd hadn't been to the doctor in—years. Close to a decade. He hadn't gone even when he promised he'd get that mole checked out, the colonoscopy you were supposed to have at forty-five. He was bad at promises. Also, he didn't think he would ever die.

The last time this had happened, four years ago, he had promised her that he would change, that he would never do this again, but—well, bad at promises. And now, listening to him snore: she wanted to wake him and scream at him, but she had already done that. What was there to say that she hadn't said before? That he could respond to intelligently? What did she want from him anyway? It was a question he used to ask her all the time.

Her mother used to say that if you couldn't take things day by day, you

should try to take them hour by hour, and if that proved too much you could just take them minute by minute. Get through this minute, and then the next, and soon you'll have made it through an hour, then a morning, then a day. Her mother wasn't much for good advice, but this nugget had proved useful over the years.

It was 8:12 in the morning. She could make it till 8:13, and then 8:30, and then reassess her life. Her mother would also have told her not to be an asshole, to grow up and move out, but her mother had died nine years ago on the couch in the tiny Minneapolis house where she'd lived for forty-one years. (Her brother had found her, peaceful, under a blanket, as if napping. A Stephen King book on the coffee table, coffee gone cold. The cat nowhere to be found. Her mother had been seventy-six and deserved the rest.)

Amy missed her more than she would have expected.

She clicked on her phone's photo app and reversed the lens so she could look at herself from a weird angle, one of her favorite punishments. Faded circles under her eyes, a curly blond ponytail going gray. Broken blood vessels on and around her nose. Once upon a time, in this generally unflappable city, strangers had stopped her on the street to tell her how beautiful she was. She had her mother's wide mouth and robin's egg eyes. But now she was halfway done being forty-six, and nobody had stopped her in years.

"Judd?" she whispered. "Judd?" She said it a little more loudly, an invocation. Without Judd, what would have happened to her? She'd grown up a too-tall, too-poor nineties kid, beset not only with a bitter single mother but also a twin brother who was gay at a time when being gay was not a social asset. Minnesota winters with the heat turned up to fifty-eight, just enough to keep the pipes from freezing; endless meals of plain pasta with shake cheese. Free breakfast at school, free lunch at school. The other kids so unceasingly mean.

Even then, her truest companions had been animals. A small branch of the Hennepin County shelter was around the corner from her house—a couple of cat rooms and pens for the dogs—and she hadn't walked in with a plan to volunteer as much as she had just escaped there one day, fourteen years old, her mom railing about a doctor's bill and the electric shut off again. Looking for rescue herself. The old ladies at the shelter were not kindly, exactly, but they were matter-of-fact: "if you're going to hang out here, you're going to make yourself useful." And therefore Amy learned to trim claws and wash blankets, to mix up feed.

Every day after school, and some days when she didn't go at all, she was

at the shelter, bottle-feeding the kittens whose mothers had rejected them and trying to comfort the pitties nobody wanted. Reuniting her neighbors with their lost pets. The look of gratitude on the owners' faces, their pets' licks and sloppy kisses.

And then, seventeen years old, she was finally saved herself at the Mall of America one chilly October morning. The shelter was closed to volunteers—another ringworm outbreak—but she couldn't face going to school, so she decided to spend the day trying on sweaters from the sale rack at the Limited. She assumed the guy who approached her was a truancy officer. She was willing to take her punishment, call her mother from the PD in the basement of the mall.

"Can I take your picture?"

Oh, not a truancy officer; a perv. "Sure," she said.

He was tall, shaggy haired, could have been anywhere from twenty-five to forty. He took a few shots with a Polaroid he happened to have in his backpack, pictures of her just standing in the dressing room with the curtain open. Nobody at the Limited seemed to care.

He shook out the Polaroids and they looked at them together as they came into focus. Amy was so tall and so skinny that it was impossible to find an oversize sweater that would hang the way she liked.

"Sorry," she said. Whatever the man wanted in her he wasn't going to find.

"Listen, how old are you, nineteen?"

"Seventeen."

"Seventeen? That's great—but why aren't you in school? Okay, who cares, listen, I'm a photographer, I think you have something here."

"What kind of thing?"

"Modeling—what did you think? Surely you've been approached before."

Amy shook her head, dumbstruck. Modeling. She had a face like a pie plate, huge eyes. The only models she knew were Claudia Schiffer and Cindy Crawford—women who were, above all else, *pretty*. Whereas in an unofficial vote in the sixth grade Amy had been selected Ugliest Girl at Mondale Middle.

She picked up one of the Polaroids from the bench in the dressing room. What did she see? Unruly blond curls, flat chest, scared expression.

"You can't see it?"

She shrugged.

"You ever been to New York?"

She barked a laugh.

His name was Scott, and he was really just an aspiring photographer, but he took her to TGI Friday's and by the time lunch was over, she had an entirely new idea of her future. Fuck Minnesota, fuck her miserable mother, fuck even—well, it was sad, but she'd have to leave her animals. She had no other choice if she wanted to be saved.

She left a note for her mother on her eighteenth birthday: *I'm taking the bus to New York City, since I'm an adult now*. She wondered if her mom would be mad or relieved. She did not call to find out, and then they didn't speak for three years.

And while the modeling thing didn't, in the end, exactly take off (a few jobs here or there, a catalog, a stocking ad, and then, for months, nothing at all), in New York she still found herself as happy as she'd ever been. It turned out that everything that was wrong in Minnesota was right in New York: the music on the streets, the endless variety of people, the ability to be seen or not be seen, depending on her mood. And there was a shelter right there on Avenue D that needed her to do laundry, to walk dogs, to reunite lost cats with their owners in whatever time she had to spare.

It was one of the ladies at the Avenue D shelter who asked her if she knew how to waitress—her brother's diner was short-staffed and Amy seemed quick on her feet. She had never done it before but how hard could it be? Turned out hard, but not impossible. And then, after three months, one of the cooks OD'd during a dinner shift and everyone was desperate. Could you try? the owner asked. Turned out she could work fast, didn't mind sweating, learned knife skills by osmosis—and before she knew it, she was a line cook. She was skinny but she'd always liked to eat. She knew how things should taste. She stopped going to pointless casting calls, spent mornings, instead, on her mise en place.

The diner changed hands, so she moved to a Mexican joint; the Mexican joint went out of business. Then her roommate ditched their lease and her mom *still* wouldn't take her calls and her brother sent her twenty dollars after she confessed she was broke. The twenty left her feeling even more broke. Nobody at the shelter knew of any openings anywhere. So, with the courage that came from being out of options, she walked into Le Coin's glamorous dining room to find a job.

At a table in the back of the room sat Judd, casually riffling through papers. When he looked up at her she fell speechless: those eyes!

What did he see when he saw her? Tall, blond, attractive in an offbeat way, said she could cook.

"Have I seen you before?" he asked.

Amy took a moment before finding her words. "Maybe," she said. Then: "I doubt it."

"You're a cook?"

"Yes."

"Show me."

One minute became the next minute, one year became the next. She had never stopped loving him, she was sure.

Roxy drank steadily from her bowl. Judd's snores receded. After a moment of quiet, he called out from the bedroom.

"Babe? Are you there?"

"I'm here," she said.

"What? I can't hear you."

"I said I'm here."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

He was quiet then, and she knew he was deciding whether or not to believe her. It would be easier to believe her, but: they had been married for years, and had been through this twice before. Still, Judd liked to do what was easy, or what was readily available. She heard him pee with the door open.

"Could you close the door?"

Instead he flushed.

One of the cats leapt onto the kitchen table, Sir Licks-A-Lot, named by Ferry when he was in the fifth grade and now a source of much mirth at the cat's veterinary appointments.

"Hey Licky," Amy said as the cat sniffed her coffee.

It wasn't that she didn't understand. It wasn't that she expected better. She had spent her whole life protecting her low expectations. Childhood Christmas presents of socks and underwear; the friendless school years; ushered out of modeling before she'd ever really gotten started. She had never asked for much.

But still, she had asked for better than this, and he consistently refused to deliver. Moreover, just because they'd been through this twice before didn't make it easier to know what to say to him now. I'm leaving? She wasn't leaving. We need to go to counseling? They'd already tried that. More counseling? What else was there to talk about?

She rejected the obvious choice—to leave, of course—because she was weak (this is what her mother would say). Or because she loved him,

although her mother didn't believe in love. And/or because the pain of living through this again was preferable to the pain of losing him forever (again, she was weak).

And she knew that Judd didn't want a divorce, because down deep in his faithless heart he loved her, too, despite the fact that he was an unrepentant poonhound.

"Hey," he said softly, standing in the doorway, uneasy. At least he had the good sense to be uneasy. He was wearing flannel pajama pants, an unbuttoned shirt, wide hairy belly, wild brown hair standing up in all directions. He was massive, six-five; he almost filled the doorway, and she had always felt safe in his enormity. He was the rare man who could make her feel small. Her initials were tattooed on his forearm amid a wreath of flowers.

"Hey," she said.

"Want some breakfast?"

She didn't answer.

"You aren't hungry?"

"A woman came up to me in the park and told me Roxy was miserable."

"What?"

"A woman," she said. "Came up to me in the park. And told me—"

"That's insane."

"It was upsetting," she acknowledged. Sir Licks jumped off the table.

Judd sat down opposite her, reached for her hands.

"I don't know," she said, letting her hands go limp in his.

"Know what?"

"I don't know what to do."

"You don't have to do anything," he said.

"Well I should probably do something," she said. "This keeps happening."

"Nothing happened."

"Judd."

"Nothing—"

"Please, stop it. I saw what I saw. Stop telling me I didn't. I'm not a child."

"I'll fire her."

She took a yoga breath. "You could be sued."

"She's a shitty employee. And nothing happened between us that could be construed as—"

"I told you to stop saying that."

He rubbed her fingers with his own meaty fingers. She did not pull away.

Stubble, thick eyebrows, ice wolf eyes. That's what she told her friends after she first met him at the restaurant, *he has ice wolf eyes*. Nobody knew what an ice wolf was but they could imagine those eyes, how crystal their blue. He had a nose that had been punched a few times, a chef's bonanza of scars and burns up and down his arms and even on his neck. A deep crease between his eyebrows.

"I wanted to call my mother today," she said, which was a lie, but Judd was attached to mothers, his own, even Ferry's—so she knew he'd feel bad when she said that. "I forgot for a second that she's dead."

"Ame," he said.

"She's been dead for almost a decade."

"I know," he said.

"Which is good because if she knew about this it would kill her."

Heavy sigh. Impossible rogue.

"Amy—"

"You have to fire her."

"Of course, I know."

"Someone with that kind of judgment cannot be your employee."

"I thought you were worried she'd sue."

"You'll countersue."

He was still rubbing her fingers. "Can I make you some breakfast?"

"You forgot how to cook," she said, which was an old joke between them. She didn't know why she was relenting; she always relented.

He smiled. "That's not true."

Two nights ago she swore she'd never look at him again. Now they were holding hands.

"Ame," he said, letting his voice go husky, "I know—I know what you saw. I know what it looks like. I know it will be impossible for me to convince you __"

"I don't know what to do, Judd," she said. She had wanted breakfast; now she realized she was about to cry. She looked at the table to keep from crying, but still her eyes were starting to sting. "Can you tell me what to do?"

"Just believe me," he said.

"What would you do?" she asked. "If you were me?"

"I would believe me."

She had already let him back in. She had already let him sleep in their bed. Was it really so much to ask, to break the promise she had made to herself two nights ago?

On the other hand, she kept breaking promises to herself and this was