



a novel

ONCE UPON A TIME IN DOLLYWOOD

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ROLLER
COASTER.

ASHLEY JORDAN

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BERKLEY ROMANCE
New York

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About the Author

To all the Black girls and women mistaken for difficult when they just needed to be seen.

And to the village of Black women who not only raised me, but lifted me—Mom, Portland, Stefani, Brenda, Wylene, Janet, Annie Ruth, Lula, Ruby Jean, Phyllis, Stephanie, Dianne, Anita, Barbara, Shirley, Soneni, and Miss Hattie—I love you.

Pain is important: how we evade it, how we succumb to it,
how we deal with it, how we transcend it.

—Audre Lorde

Dear Reader,

I won't lie—this isn't exactly a light story. While it is absolutely a romance, and I do think there is quite a bit to laugh (or at least chuckle) about, it's not what I'd call a rom-com. I want you to go into this knowing that I cried while writing parts of this novel, and low-key (maybe high-key), I hope you cry a little reading it! So, with that in mind, there are some heavy themes you should be aware of before you dive in: fertility issues, infidelity, teenage pregnancy and childhood trauma, adoption, divorce, and battles with depression and anxiety. Like many love stories, this is a book about our beautiful, ordinary lives and the many dark and bright spots within. I hope you're willing to go on this ride—I like to think it'll be worth it—but more important, I hope you take care of yourself.

Warmly,

Ashley

Unoriginal Sin

EVE

Eve's thoughts were swirling. Running rampant. She wasn't entirely sure she wasn't drowning—in her feelings, at least—as she sat silent and helpless in front of her fiancé and his therapist, watching them talk about her as if she weren't in the room. She wished she weren't in the room.

I just lost my baby, and now I'm losing my mind.

There were no windows. Why no windows? She might as well have been sitting in a box. That might have made more sense—this sensation of feeling trapped. Instead, Eve just sat there, studying the taupe walls, decorated with little more than degrees and other accolades, counting the minutes until she could escape. There was one piece of art within eyeshot, a chart alleging the correlation between success in therapy and stepping outside one's comfort zone. Eve rolled her eyes.

"She's such a trooper," Leo said, shaking his head. He sighed, the notion ostensibly too heavy to bear, and then followed it up with a half smile in her direction, as if that would somehow console her; as if they wouldn't still be going home with this heartbreak hanging over their heads.

Eve was vexed by his unending affability—something no one would ever accuse her of—knowing he was going to take her hand any second now. And she was going to have to pretend that she wasn't revolted by the thought of being touched in that moment. She would have to force herself not to physically recoil, lest her future husband and his psychiatrist realize just how shitty a person she was.

“I just feel like I’m failing her, because I don’t know what to say,” Leo continued. “I can’t fix it. I wonder if I’m just making shit worse sometimes.”

Eve felt herself glaring at him as he pensively rubbed his graying beard, performing his guilt.

That wasn’t fair to say. He probably did feel guilty on some level. But it just gave Eve another reason to feel bad, and she already had plenty. The physical ache was enough, but the mental anguish hung on her like lead. It was why she hadn’t left the house for the last two weeks. She only came to this appointment so Leo would shut up about it. But if she’d known he’d sit here and effectively blame her for not knowing how to make him feel better, she would’ve just stayed in bed.

“Eve, do you want to say more about how you’ve been feeling?” Dr. Hawthorne asked. “Leo wanted you to have a safe space, too.”

Eve knew all too well that there were no safe spaces. If there were, this wouldn’t keep happening. She wouldn’t be mourning the loss of a third embryo, when all she’d wanted, for seventeen years now, was a child.

“I feel broken,” she said, and then corrected herself: “Barren.”

The doctor nodded. “But you know you’re not, right? That your worth, your sense of self, is not wrapped up in carrying a baby to term?”

It was Leo’s turn to chime in, apparently. “It’s what I’ve been trying to tell her for a year now. And that we have other options, too, if she wants to try ’em.”

Eve nodded back, understanding the logic, and she could see their mouths continue to move, the two of them attempting to explain her own feelings to her. But a rush of emotions left the room spinning, all their words turned to white noise, an incessant scraping at her ears. The dizziness gave way to panic, a feeling as if she’d been pushed off a cliff. A sudden loss of control, both physical and emotional, as pangs of dread thumped in her chest. She felt simultaneously exposed and smothered, cold and hot. The edges of the room went dark, leaving Eve with only her frenzied and conflicting musings. She’d experienced this before, this need to dissociate, to

somehow get outside of her own body, but never quite so acutely. She could not sit still any longer.

As Leo indeed reached across the small space between them, taking her hand, Eve disentangled her fingers from his grip and stood from her seat unsteadily.

She grabbed her purse from the back of her chair and left the airless room without a word. If either of them called after her, she didn't hear it.

She continued out of the office and into the late-June midday sun, wishing she had the forethought to have a Lyft waiting before exiting. The heat—the humidity, really—was somehow even more suffocating than the sense of failure that had wrapped itself around her the moment she realized she'd miscarried *again*. Trying to talk through it with Leo's therapist was a compromise for his sake, but therapy only made her feel broken open. And nothing was going to assuage this feeling—a particularly demoralizing confluence of pain and emptiness.

Eve held back tears as a bright green cab passed and she inwardly cursed herself for not hailing it. Leo would be following her outside soon, and she simply did not have the energy to be normal for him. But the entrance to Prospect Park sat just a few steps from Dr. Hawthorne's office, and it would be easy enough to vanish there.

Eve hurried across the street, dodging traffic and passersby, until she reached the majestic old arch that welcomed her into the park. It was busy for a random Wednesday, kids running rampant in their summer freedom. It wasn't ideal for Eve, a hundred little reminders of what she'd lost. But on hot days like this, she liked to head to the Ravine, where it was cooler than probably anywhere else in the city, full of footbridges and unique little waterfalls, enclosed in a parcel of trees. It was Brooklyn's only forest, small as it was, but enough to be pacifying.

As she approached a small boulder to claim as her seat, she felt her phone vibrating in her purse. She retrieved it, knowing it was Leo, knowing she wouldn't answer, but took note of the string of texts he'd sent in the five minutes they'd been apart: six varying versions of *What the fuck?*

Instead of replying, Eve went to her favorite contacts, where her mother sat at the top of the list, her best friend just below, letting her thumb hover over the entries as she wrestled with whom to call. Conversations with her mother had a fifty-fifty chance of going awry, and Eve was already in a foul mood. But Maya was working, and she didn't want to dampen her day yet again.

Before Eve could make a decision, drops of water dotted her touch screen, and she halfway wondered if an impromptu rain shower was the culprit, despite the beating sun. But instead of fighting the onslaught of emotion, she bowed her head and let her tears fall, sobbing quietly as the sound of children's laughter in the background haunted her.

—

"Well, you look good for someone who ain't left the house since Memorial Day."

Eve suppressed what would've been a genuine but self-effacing smile as she entered her best friend's studio. While she appreciated that Maya noticed what little effort she put into her appearance—from her little black sundress to the high pony she'd fashioned her box braids into—she was loath to encourage any more backhanded compliments.

"Hello to you, too," Eve said. She claimed the plush chartreuse couch set opposite her friend and practically nestled into it like it was her bed. She would've fallen asleep there if it weren't for the crazy eyes boring into her. "What?"

Maya shut down her computer and crossed her arms. "Why did your texts make it sound like you're a fugitive?"

Eve shifted to her back, lying like she was in a psychiatrist's office—ironically—and stared at the textured ceiling. "I guess I kinda am," she said. She used the knuckle of her thumb to massage the bridge of her nose in a

useless attempt at tempering the headache that had formed in the thirty minutes since she left Leo. "I have to get out of this place."

"You told me that much," Maya said. "How do we get you outta here?"

"You don't even wanna know why?"

Maya shook her head. "Don't matter why."

Eve didn't hold back her smile this time, the ceaseless comfort of Maya's New Orleans inflection doing its job. "I feel like I can't breathe here," she said.

"Okay. So where can you breathe?"

Eve wasn't sure that such a place existed. Everything felt suffocating if she had enough time to think about it. "I wish I could go back to college," she said. She didn't realize it until long after she was gone, but her time in Atlanta was her first, and perhaps last, experience with freedom. Away from her parents, cocooned from the noise of her mistakes. "I don't know," she eventually appended. "Anywhere but here."

"You want me to take you to the airport in the morning?" Maya asked. "We can just choose from the departure boards."

Eve admired the thought, but her neurosis would never allow her to be *that* spontaneous. Planning a trip with a day's notice was pushing her limits, but she could not, would not set foot on a plane without having accommodations at her destination. "Did you forget who you're talking to?"

"I'm just trying to get you outta here as efficiently as possible," Maya said. "So you can try to get your happy back."

Sounded nice, but Eve couldn't remember the last time she concerned herself with being happy. She just wanted to be...not sad.

"Maybe..." Eve paused before letting her suggestion into the air, knowing that once it was out there, she was probably going to follow it. There were so many places she could go to take a break. A couple of weeks in Los Angeles always did her well. The openness of it all. The antithesis of home, the high-strung havoc of New York. Or she could go to Paris for a bit. She'd always had an abstract dream of escaping to the City of Light and James Baldwining it up for a year or two. The way her bank account was set

up, she couldn't quite afford that luxury, and again, she was not someone who could live on whims. But she could do it for about a month.

Mostly, Eve wanted to drop off the grid, and the one place that kept coming back to her mind was some cabin in the middle of nowhere, where she could grieve and write—in no particular order—all by herself.

"I think I'm going to Gatlinburg," she finally said. She gazed at Maya, awaiting her approval—or lack thereof.

Maya only raised an eyebrow. "You *sure* you wanna go back there?"

Eve shrugged. "Can't hurt any more than I already do."

"Damn."

"That was a long time ago anyway."

Maya gave her a knowing look, clear that Eve was in denial, at best, and lying, at worst.

"I sort of already knew what I was gonna do before I got here," Eve admitted. She pulled out her phone, where she had started her search for flights on the ride there, and lamented that she would have to fly out of LaGuardia if she wanted a nonstop route. "I guess I just wanted to see your face before I left," she added.

"Bitch, why are you being so dramatic? How long you goin' for?"

"I don't know."

"A year?" Maya asked, cocking her head as if to challenge Eve.

"Probably not, but..."

"It better not be a year."

"I said I don't know," Eve said.

"So you gon' sit up in your grandmama's old cabin by yourself for a year? Shut up."

"I can't stand you," Eve said, holding back her amusement.

"A second ago, you couldn't live without my face."

"When I don't call you for a year, I want you to recall this moment as the reason why."

"I will hunt you down in Tennessee before I let that happen," Maya said.

“You can try.”

“And you better not need money while you’re there, because you will starve messin’ around with me.”

Maya’s immaculate smile evolved into a laugh, and Eve responded in kind. A small one, but a laugh, nonetheless. Which was precisely why she wanted to see her best friend. She wasn’t in a laughing mood, and hadn’t been for the last few weeks, but Maya would bring her to a place where she could at least fathom it for a couple of minutes. She always took the pain away.

“I just hope a change of pace will let me feel something different,” Eve said, sobering.

Maya nodded. “It’s the hope that kills you, you know.”

“No shit.” It was all this time, the *years* she’d spent hoping for a baby, that left her feeling like this.

The last pregnancy test she took had been on her opening night at Playwrights Horizons, with Maya waiting on the other side of a bathroom stall as Eve anxiously peed on a stick. They spent the requisite three-minute wait reminiscing, as they often did when they didn’t want to face the complexities of present-day adult life. They cried with a muted delight when the result came back positive, after Eve spent the better part of the holidays trying to get over her second miscarriage. She hoped upon hope that the third time would be the charm. And so, this one only felt heavier. Crueler.

Maya sat back in her chair, her arms folded over her chest again like a judgmental auntie. “I don’t like it. But I guess I’m gonna be an adult about this. Go...get better. Write a play about it. Shit’s way cheaper than therapy.” She let out a somber chuckle and so did Eve. “But then bring your ass home.”

Eve replied with a strained smile. But Maya wasn’t wrong—writing had been far more therapeutic than any time she’d spent on a psychologist’s couch. It would be nice if she could write her way through this. If she could fix herself. “I’ll try.”

When Eve walked into her parents' Strivers' Row brownstone, she shouldn't have been surprised to find Leo waiting there. He was like a stray puppy, desperate for affection from the human who abandoned it. She often wished she had a dog, but Leo was allergic. So she accepted his unconditional love, regretful that she didn't have the same to give to him. He'd called her four times, and texted twice more, and she ignored nearly all of them. *I'm ok* was her only response after his third attempt, and even that was a lie. Depression, even when exacerbated by what they were going through, wasn't a good excuse for treating loved ones badly. But she would use it, and he would take it.

"You found me." She said it as a simple statement of fact, too numb to even be annoyed.

"Maya told me where you were headed."

Eve made a mental note to curse her out next time they spoke, then continued into the kitchen, where she found her mother hovering over the Crock-Pot on the island counter. She couldn't help but notice how the white marble top matched her mother's gray locs, and she welcomed the distraction from the heavier things on her mind. The unmistakable aroma of stewing oxtails brought Eve a modicum of much-needed comfort.

"I thought I heard your voice," Joan greeted her. She embraced Eve with a quick kiss to her cheek and then studied her face, undoubtedly looking for something to comment on. To criticize. "You would look so nice with a bit of color on your lips," she decided. "A nice red would bring out your beautiful skin."

"Where's Daddy?" Eve asked, resisting the urge to argue.

Joan resumed stirring and seasoning as Eve looked on. "He's around here somewhere."

Eve surveyed the bright space—a pot of rice sat on the stove, a half-mixed salad on the counter closest to the refrigerator, the dinner china waiting just beside the slow cooker, with an assortment of silverware resting

on the top plate. She spotted a set of keys sitting near the landline at the entryway. "Are those for me?"

"Oh, yes." Joan gestured for her to take them. "I realized that her car would still be there, too. You're going to need one while you're there."

Eve had been relieved that her mother didn't make a big deal when she called to ask for the keys to her grandmother's cabin. No superfluous questions disguised as concern, none of her typical meddling. Just an agreement that the cabin would be a great place to write her next play. It did come with a bit of unsolicited advice: *You need to strike while the iron is hot, sweetheart*. But Eve took the empty platitude in stride because she'd been expecting worse. Which was why Eve wasn't surprised when she went to retrieve the key ring and found a church bulletin sitting directly underneath it.

"Ask and it will be given to you, knock and the door shall be opened." True prayer is a personal dialogue with God in which we trust in God's mercy and kindness.

Eve rolled her eyes. The Parish of St. Charles Borromeo had become something of a thorn in her side as she found herself outgrowing her Catholic upbringing.

"How old is that car anyway?" Eve asked, ignoring the provocation. She rejoined her mother to take in the sights and smells of the oxtails.

"Oh goodness." Joan paused to think about it. "Probably...twenty years old now."

"Jesus."

She flicked her daughter for the mild blasphemy and went on, "It's a sturdy car. It'll get you where you need to go."

"I don't think I'll be going too many places, but it'll be nice to have," Eve said. "Thanks, Ma."