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for your own summer vacation."

—Elin Hilderbrand

MAKE

NICE

A Novel

RYAN EFFGEN

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Ryan Effgen



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For my family and yours

MONDAY

“Hugs!” Viv announced before throwing her arms around Pete, smothering him in a warm, familial embrace. Her boobs mashed into the zippers of his safari vest, but so it went with hugs. Pete wasn’t a hugger, so she always gave him fair warning. She stepped back and looked him up and down. Little brother. Rosy-cheeked and unwed, well into his thirties. The safari vest perhaps wasn’t helping in that regard, but that was Pete: Life was one big nature hike. Her gaze finally settled on the brown fedora, clean and not at all broken in. A new purchase for the trip and a bold move for Pete. She resolved not to tease him about it, and not to let their father do so either. “Weird being back here, right?”

“It is weird,” Pete said. “Familiar and strange. Like a dream.”

They’d spent much of their childhood summers on the island before their parents sold their dinky little summer home, explaining to the kids that they’d outgrown it. None of the Pickfords had been back until now. They both took in the scene. The island airport terminal was small, white, and more charming than an airport ought to be. Regular airports and their impersonal shittiness at least gave off a no-nonsense vibe: We’re here to get a job done. This place, from the outside, looked like it might be a golf pro shop or a small café where wealthy people ordered egg-white omelets. Out front, an American flag flapped at the top of a tall pole. A nice little breeze came from Lake Michigan.

“Did that outfit come with a compass?” Viv asked. “You wanna lead us to the hotel?”

“The hotel sends carriages, actually,” Pete said. “With a driver and everything, though I read that the horses can get you there on their own. They know the island like the back of their, well, I suppose, hoof.”

Viv punched his shoulder. “Back of their hoof. Classic Pete.” How was this adorable, brilliant dope alone? A loss for any number of women out there who surely would be as fond of him as he was of snails, sea slugs, and other moist, aquatic things. He was a scientist. Who wouldn’t want to date a scientist? For a time, Viv worried he’d come to regret being so consumed by his work, the double career of slogging around in the muck, panning for specimens, then getting cleaned up and mentoring grad students. But now she had to envy him. A single duffel bag and no one to worry about.

She tilted her head back. “My god, I forgot about the air here. I’m retroactively grossed out by how Chicago smells.”

“It’s the lack of cars.” Pete took a deep, nostril-flaring breath. “And the negative ions from the lake.”

“The what, now?”

Pete shifted to explanation mode, as if there were a whiteboard behind him. “The force of the crashing waves produces negative ions. Which is a good thing! It filters out pollutants. Boosts your mood a bit.” He gave the brim of his fedora a little tug. He seemed not to have settled on how it ought to rest on his head. Viv was already won over by it. It was easy enough to picture him leading a troop of students on a nature center hike, as he often did in his spare time. A spiffy hat was just the thing to distinguish him as the leader.

“Can we talk about the hat? Because I love it.”

Pete quickly took it off and shyly turned it in his hands. “High praise coming from you.”

Viv that day wore a floral sundress, shockingly bright, the pattern like campy, vintage wallpaper. Red-framed sunglasses and lipstick to match. Beside her were a pair of roller suitcases, polished aluminum ones that gleamed in the sun. The cases were fitted out with a pair of locks that you were meant to turn in unison, as if she were transporting plutonium.

Pete looked around. “No Warren?”

“Nope. There’s some mega-crisis at his work.”

“The whole week?”

“The whole damned week. Blah blah merger. Streamlining the synergy. I’m making it sound cooler than it is. But he’s been put in charge of stuff, so, yay?”

“You holding up okay?” He meant about their mother, who had passed away some three months back. Returning to the island had actually been their mother’s idea and had been on the books for some time. The island and their former home had been her thing, and she’d been insistent on having everyone attend this little reunion. Her insistence surprised Viv, as her parents had been tight-lipped about the abrupt sale of their former island home; kids eventually learned not to ask. Then her mom’s sudden passing transformed the week into a tribute. Their father decreed, via email, there’d be no mourning on this trip. This was to be happy, family time.

“Holding up, for sure. A bit worried about the old man finding his way forward. She handled the little stuff, you know? It’s like, he paid for that big house, but does he even know how it works? When we were home for the funeral, I caught him pouring Palmolive into the dishwasher. I had to explain the difference between soap and detergent. His fault for just now learning this stuff, but it kinda broke my heart.”

Pete bit his lip and nodded. Then, turning his head. “Is that Ashley?” motioning toward the young teen seated on a white bench beneath the airport’s curtained awning.

Viv took a breath before answering. “Ash, not Ashley. She’s become very insistent about it. Got all of her teachers well trained.”

“Oh! Okay. Is this—can I ask—is this a gender thing?”

“More like an I-hate-my-name thing. We have entered the defiant years. Which, really, is all we’ve ever had with Ash.”

“Apple doesn’t fall far,” Pete said. “And how is Ash doing?”

“As well as any high school sophomore, which is to say: not amazing. She had a falling-out with her friend group, and she’s acting like she doesn’t care,

but she does. I'm hoping our time on the island will do her some good. It gives you distance, you know? Like, the bullshit back home can't find me here. It can't travel over water. Ash! Come say hello to your uncle!"

Ash looked up from her book. "Science uncle!"

Viv said to Pete, "Hope you like the moniker. For a while, we were referring to our other sibling as 'wayward uncle.' Sometimes 'prodigal uncle' or 'struggling uncle.'"

"Struggling. I think that's fair. Makes it sound like he's trying to do better."

"It's generous is what it is."

"I like that I'm 'science uncle.'" He looked at Ash fondly. "Actually, I've got a little surprise that might interest her. It involves mollusks."

"Well, color me intrigued."

Ash joined them and they surveyed the half-dozen horse-drawn carriages, lined up and waiting. "So we're supposed to just pick one or what?" Viv approached one of the carriages, gesturing at the pair of horses with her chin. "Those two know where the Grand Hotel is?"

The man's eyebrows shot up. "Grand Hotel, they call it. Just a sec." He summoned another driver, whose carriage, previously hidden by the others, emerged, led by a massive pair of steeds. Tourists turned to admire the scene: this cherry-red carriage, lacquered and polished and glistening in the sun. Its driver wore a red coat and a top hat. Pete and Ash sidled up beside Viv. Without a word, the driver climbed down and efficiently gathered up their luggage and stored it on the roof. Even the ropes securing the luggage were charming, brass grommets and all. He then opened a door for Viv and company, setting out a little step stool for them. "I could get used to this!" Pete said, beaming. His enthusiasm was met with a faint nod from the driver: the decorum of a butler who strove to remain unseen.

They began to move. Rhythmic clomps from hooves on asphalt. Viv decided not to think too hard about it. Not to consider whether it was right and just for these magnificent animals to spend their days carting a bunch of yahoos around a cheesy vacation island. She needed the week to be restful,

and that included all the noise in her head. The town's shops came into view. That morning, getting into an Uber out front of her home in Evanston, she could have offered up just a small handful of details about the island. She remembered their house, which was long gone (she'd caught a painful glimpse on Google Street View), and she recalled a few of the ice cream parlors and a little boat shack by the water. But now that she was here, memories were unlocked. Everything was right where she'd left it, all of it candy-colored and vibrant. There was the fudge shop where she first took her lifelong stance against white chocolate. There was the hokey little island gifts boutique where she bought a nautical rope bracelet and wore it until college. The flow of memories kept on, as if a levee had broken. The flavor of root beer rock candy. The smell of hose water on hot cement. Lightning bugs. Waffle cones. Shops that only sold wooden toys. Bicycles with wicker baskets. Mini golf and fireworks. Childhood. Then beyond childhood. They'd kept the house until Viv was about Ash's age. Her final summer there left Viv with a story she almost never told, save for one time in college while playing Never Have I Ever, when she bluntly proclaimed: *Never have I ever fucked in a rowboat...* then, declaring herself guilty, drank.

Brilliant, really, how over the top the island was. Some of the dopey visitors would believe they were seeing life as it once was. And another portion, the one that included herself, would admire how the island had doubled down on the kitsch. It wasn't the set of a movie; it was the set of a musical. It was all so perfectly frivolous. Only candy stores and T-shirt shops and ice cream and coffee. Not a single item that could help a person in an emergency. No Band-Aids, tampons, antiseptic. It would've broken the spell to admit that the body had needs that could not be met with lemonade and saltwater taffy. She had lied about her husband's work. They'd been having problems. Or, rather, a single, mountain-size problem, and the one thing she and Warren could agree on is that they needed some space. If she'd had her druthers, she would be off in wine country with a college friend. But the timing was what it was, and so now she was getting carted along by a pair of horses down Main Street. Of course it was called Main Street. Viv picked out

the horse scents. Breath. Hair. A faint whiff of manure—not enough to be repulsive. Just enough to confirm the presence of a living thing. Reassuring, in a way.

“We shall not want for fudge,” she said. Joann’s Fudge. May’s Fudge. Murdick’s Fudge. “Ash, give the book a rest for two seconds and look around!”

Ash complied, resting a colorful Japanese graphic novel on the knees of her fuzzy pajama pants. She and her friends had never fully come out of quarantine. She raised her chin. “This town smells like funnel cake.”

“They have a Starbucks now,” Pete pointed out. It was retrofitted into a cozy storefront, the corporate mermaid hand-carved into a round wooden shingle that hung from a wrought-iron signpost. Viv snapped a photo so she could text it to Warren. They had a thing for quaint-ified corporate storefronts. Ye olde Targets and such. She thought for a moment, then deleted the photo. Another cyclist passed the carriage, giving a chirpy little *ring-ring* from her bicycle bell. Everyone on the street seemed like movie extras, entering Viv’s field of vision on cue. The carriage briefly halted at an intersection so another carriage could pass. An elderly couple sat on a bench, eating ice cream out of oversize waffle cones. “I guess we were too young to really question what this place even is. But what is it?” she asked no one in particular. “A carnival without rides? A beach town without an ocean? A colonial village without the history?”

The driver spoke up. “Many visitors want to know where all the cars are.” He seemed disappointed that no one had asked. “The island has been car-free since 1898, just a few years after the arrival of the horseless carriage, as we like to call it. Of course, the island does have a few emergency vehicles. Police, fire, ambulance, naturally.”

“Do they have names?” Ash asked loudly.

“What was that?” the driver politely asked.

“The horses. They got names?”

Her question pleased the driver. “Edwin and Hans. Hans is named after Clever Hans, a horse who was famous for his skills with arithmetic. His

owner would challenge him with addition and subtraction problems, and Clever Hans would provide the correct answer with stomps of his hoof.”

“That was fake, though,” Ash said.

The driver turned around on his little seat. “Very good! It did turn out to be a bit of chicanery.”

“Your horse is named after a liar.”

“Ash.” Viv and Pete tightened their lips to stifle laughter.

The driver transitioned back to being unseen.

“Probably the cleverest animal, not counting primates, is the octopus,” Pete said brightly. “Easily the cleverest mollusk, in any case.”

Neither Viv nor Ash had anything to say to that. Ash was back to her book. Viv watched Pete watching Ash. Meeting up with family had an effect on Viv. Her husband and child and day-to-day existence—that was everything, that was the entire world. But then a sibling came into view, and suddenly she felt seen. She would view her own life through his eyes, and it all shrank. Her life was no longer the entire world but a niche little museum she’d been curating. *Here’s where we display our child’s current phase. And in this wing, we keep the husband. He’s part of the permanent collection.*

The museum was in shambles. Her mind was back on Warren. *Blah blah merger.* She’d rehearsed that. It’d be more convincing if the reason bored her. *Merger.* She hadn’t intended it ironically. They hadn’t committed to separating. Not yet. Viv was still processing Warren’s bombshell. *Now that I know, it’s like I’ve always known. But of course I didn’t. Does that make any sense?* He’d put his hand out on top of hers, as if her sole purpose in that moment was to understand that she had loved, had had an uncountable amount of sex with, and had created a child with a man who apparently had been gay the whole time. And her heart did go out to him. And she also could’ve killed Warren, as he sat there, wounded, as if this were some sort of saintly affliction. As if she were not merely supposed to understand, but to cheer him on, to wave from the dock as he departed, at long last, on his voyage of self-discovery.

This was a predictable grief cycle, Viv supposed, though she'd skipped denial—which only amplified what followed: anger. Fuck Warren. Fuck him for not knowing himself. Fuck him for this revelation. Fuck him for dragging her into it. Fuck herself for not spotting it. She, of all people. Most of all, fuck him for having Ash with her—an act based on the premise that Viv and Warren were reliable, predictable beings. A union stable enough to grow in number. And now here she was, in a horse-drawn carriage with their child, while he was off doing god knows what or whom. Ash turned a page. At age fourteen, she was no stranger to the idea of two moms or two dads. Uncommon, but ultimately no more surprising than having a set of twins in your grade.

So, are we done now? That's what Viv had said to Warren. She still didn't know. A separation made sense. She understood that. Not because either of them had a dire need for sex; it was more that the man she'd married was someone else now. Or he was the same, but more fully realized. And good for him. She did feel that. When she wasn't grinding her teeth and wanting to murder him, she felt newly affectionate toward him. She took a breath. She had no illusions that this trip was going to correct anything. Even if she got a massage at the hotel spa. Even if she drank a whole bottle of prosecco in the tub. When she packed up her shiny suitcases and checked out of the hotel, the same three words would still be true: Warren likes guys. Cherry peanut fudge wasn't going to fix that. Nor was croquet on a manicured lawn. Nor was the hotel's famous porch, the world's largest—such an odd bragging point—though, as the hotel came into view with an air of triumph, Viv found herself not just looking at it, but beholding it. It hadn't held a significant spot in her memory, as, growing up, they'd associated it with ultra-wealthy tourists with no real connection to the island. Seeing it now, she found herself saying aloud, “Okay, now that's a motherfucking porch.”

The hotel was positioned on the hill, the island's focal point. Like a grand piano, it was long, sleek, and elegantly curved. Eyes were drawn to it. Even Ash looked up. It really was something. Gleaming white, dotted with

columns and flags and daisy-yellow awnings. Against the clear blue sky, it seemed like an impossible thing, boasting old-world refinement, seersucker suits, muddled cocktails, and people who wore white sweaters on the tennis court. In a matter of days, she would depart from the island with a plan. Together or apart? Two rocky paths lay ahead. Neither was perfect, but they had to pick one. Viv would use the time here to sort it out. Also, she would make a point to enjoy herself. Drink one of those muddled cocktails or lie around in a spa with slices of cucumber on her closed eyes while some quiet handlers painted her nails, massaged her calves, and daintily restored her as if she were a fresco.

The horses increased their effort on the home stretch. The carriage ran alongside the hotel's golf course. A man stood in the center of a blindingly white sand trap. He swung at a neon yellow ball, sending it and a comet's tail of sand onto the green.

Ash spoke up. "What's up with that sand? Did they bleach it? It doesn't even look real."

"Oh! I read about this," Pete said. "That's a special variety of quartz. It comes from Spruce Pine, North Carolina. Same quartz that they use in smartphones. Tech companies buy up the purest of it, and then some high-end golf courses pay good money for the leftovers."

"Wait," Ash began, processing it all. "We're on an island. Like, with beaches. They've already got sand. They seriously had a bunch of sand shipped in from somewhere?"

"From North Carolina," Pete said.

"Sorry, that's ridiculous. Why is this sand better? Because it's white?"

"Please don't start," Viv said.

The road veered toward the hotel, and for the last several paces they were engulfed by tulips. The carriage came to a halt and a spry trio of bellhops appeared and briskly took down their luggage, passing suitcases one to the other, a spectacle of choreographed efficiency. Pete climbed down and offered a hand to young Ash, who merely tucked her book under her arm and leaped out, checkered Vans smacking the pavement. Pete then

awkwardly offered a hand to Viv, who accepted it and stepped down. “So, Ash has discovered anime?”

“Manga. It’s anime when it’s in video format. The number of times I’ve been corrected on that point. And those books are insane. I thought it was just going to be pixie girls shooting pink lasers from their eyes, but Ash is into these ghost-story manga books, and that shit gets dark. That’s not her only thing, though!” she was quick to add. “She loves science. I could see you two connecting. Hope you don’t mind if I shove the two of you together while we’re here.”

“Shove away!”

A wooden sign in the shape of an arrow indicated that the front desk was eighteen steps that way. Yet another uniformed official opened the door. For all their time on the island as kids, they’d never been inside the Grand. Viv was hit with a dizzying shock of color. “What in the what?” She was overcome by an onslaught of decorative whimsy. Green velvet couches on a black carpet patterned with red roses. Yellow floral love seats. Long and narrow black-and-white-checkered hallways. It was Christmas, it was Easter, it was Alice in Wonderland. It would’ve been gaudy if it weren’t so deliberate—someone had boldly stuck to their aesthetic guns. A graphic artist by trade, Viv was acutely aware of an establishment’s color palette—whether the goal was to soothe or to project vibrance or to establish a sense of refinement. This place strove for disbelief. You were meant to look twice at the vibrantly clashing couches and carpets, as if to make you think: *Wow, they really went for it.*

A chipper young woman greeted them at the front desk. “Pickford,” Viv said to her. “Party of us.” She put her hand on Ash’s shoulder. “We’re one room.” She then jerked her thumb at Pete. “Indiana Jones is another. This’ll all be in our father’s name. H. L. Pickford. The *H* is for Harold, but on paperwork it’s H. L.”

“Excellent.” The young lady typed on a clicky keyboard. Her eyes focused on something. “It actually looks like one of your party has already checked in.”