

Never
Have
I Ever

ALSO BY JOSHILYN JACKSON

The Almost Sisters

The Opposite of Everyone

Someone Else's Love Story

A Grown-Up Kind of Pretty

Backseat Saints

The Girl Who Stopped Swimming

Between, Georgia

dogs in Alabama

SHORT STORY

"My Own Miraculous"

Never
Have
I Ever

J O S H I L Y N
J A C K S O N

R A V E N  B O O K S
L O N D O N • O X F O R D • N E W Y O R K • N E W D E L H I • S Y D N E Y

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For three of my favorite girls, in order of height:

Taylor Myers
Olivia Browning
Tiamat Garber

THE GAME WAS ROUX'S idea. More than an idea. A plan. She made it up herself, this shotgun of a game. She packed it tight with salt and metal, counting on collateral damage, too, but she aimed it straight at me. She said it was like Never Have I Ever, but not any version I'd ever played. It began innocently enough, with everyone confessing the worst thing they'd done that day.

None of us had ever heard of Roux's rules, so it was possible she invented them that night, for us. For me. Or perhaps she'd played this way before, spreading it, so that her game now cropped up at slumber parties when Truth or Dare or Two Truths and a Lie had lost their shine. Only middle-school girls could safely play it, children whose worst thing was, *I showed my bra to that boy I like*, or *I called my sister the b-word*.

We should have known better.

We were grown-up women, so we packed our worsts away in hidden boxes. We were mothers, so we sank those boxes under jobs and mortgages and meal plans. Mothers have to sink those boxes deep.

Roux announced herself with the knocker, three sharp raps, though of course we had a doorbell. It was at least twenty minutes after every other neighbor who was coming had arrived.

Charlotte, her arms full of refill snacks, paused by the stairs and asked, "Now, who on earth could that be?" We already had a large turnout. All the regulars were here, and then some.

"I'll get it. Go on down to the basement."

I opened the door to a stranger, standing easy with the fat moon rising behind her, practically perching on her shoulder. That moon had drenched my neighborhood in silver light, soft and wavy, so she looked like she'd climbed up the steps from an underwater world into the egg-yolk glow of my porch light.

I knew from the hair, dead straight and dead black, falling past her shoulder blades, that she was the latest tenant in the Airbnb house that was the bane of Charlotte's cul-de-sac. It was a saggy-roofed eyesore that my husband, Davis, called "the Sprite House" for its peeling green-and-yellow paint job. Char kept up a running commentary on the house's ongoing decay and the transients and tourists who passed through it; she'd christened this latest one "Cher Hair."

Charlotte had also said she was pretty, but she was more than that. She was the pretty that's on television: symmetrical features, matte skin, and that kind of long, slim, yoga body that still made me feel self-conscious about my own. I hadn't been seriously overweight since I was a teenager, but looking at her I was instantly aware of the little roll of baby weight still clinging to my middle.

No purse, no book, no bottle of wine or snack to share. No bra either. She had on a loose, long sundress, deep blue, patterned in silver flowers, and a tattooed flock of tiny birds soared in silhouette across her collarbone.

She smiled, and I had no premonition as I smiled back. She didn't look like my own destruction to me. She looked . . . the word was "cool."

An odd thing to think. I was forty-two years old, and "cool" was a concept I had ceded to my teenage stepdaughter. Still, it was the word I thought, and if I felt anything, it was a stir, a rise. Here was something interesting.

Oliver was eating solid foods now, and I was emerging from a sedative cloud of nursing hormones a little restless, ready for a break in my routine. I looked at the loaded gun on my doorstep,

and, stupid me, I hoped she had the right house.

She said, "Is this where the book club meets?"

"Yep, you found us. Amy Whey." I stuck my hand out to shake hers. Her grip was firm, and she pumped twice in a way that felt weirdly businesslike.

She said, "I'm Angelica, but everybody calls me Roux."

"Roo? As in Kanga?" I asked.

"I'm no Kanga, Christopher Robin," she said, chuckling. Her lips were full and very pale. No blush, no lipstick, but the glossy orbs of her eyes were striped with liquid liner. Her oil-black hair, middle-parted, framed the perfect oval of her face. "It's just my last name. French. With an *x* at the end?"

I knew the word. Butter and flour. A thickener.

"Did you get a chance to read *The House of Mirth*?" I asked, swinging wide the door.

"Sure," Roux said, and came inside.

It was almost eight o'clock. We usually spent an hour chatting, an hour on the book, and by nine-fifteen, nine-thirty everyone was walking home feeling a little buzzed, a little smarter, a little more bonded with the other moms in our neighborhood.

"You're in the green-and-yellow house?" I asked, to be sure I had her right. Charlotte had told me Cher Hair was a single mom with a son who was old enough to drive. Inside, under the lights, she looked to be in her mid-thirties. Awfully young to have a high-school kid.

"That's me," she said.

I led her back through the house to the basement stairs. "I'm glad you came. That place is such a short-term rental, we don't usually get the residents at book club."

"I'm here on business, and I'm not sure how long it's going to take. I could be here quite a while. Might as well meet some people," she said.

We were on the stairs now. "Oh, what do you do?"

She was looking down the stairs and didn't answer. "What's up with . . . what's her name? My neighbor?"

Charlotte was hand-wringing at the foot, giving me emergency eyebrows.

"Charlotte," I reminded her. "I don't know. Let me find someone to introduce you around."

"No need," Roux said. She sailed past me, directly into the crowd, off to introduce herself.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Char said, "Cher Hair came? Now there's twenty-one people here, not counting us, and no one seems to realize we do not have enough chairs. I should not move chairs!" She kept tucking her hair back. She looked like a nervous brown mousey, cleaning its ears.

"Her name is Roux, and of course you can't move chairs, *preggo*. Relax! I'll get them," I told her.

She still looked worried, because she was Charlotte. Plus, this was her book club. She'd started it when Ruby began crawling and she realized she hadn't read a book since giving birth.

"It's like the baby ate my brain!" she'd said. "Forget reading. I can't remember the last time I washed my hair."

It looked like it had been a good while, but I'd kept that to myself. Instead I'd babysat while Char designed some flyers, and then we'd tucked them into every neighborhood mailbox. She'd called it the Brain-Dead Mommies Book Club, which I thought was bad, but at least I'd talked her out of *Zombie-Mombies*. It turned out her AA in marketing was wiser than I was. The flyer, the name, attracted the crowd she wanted. Almost everyone here was around her age, all with babies and preschoolers and littlies still in elementary. I was the oldest mommy in the room, in most cases by a good decade.

Before Oliver was born, I'd been on the fringes of this group, knowing them mostly via gossip I got from Charlotte on our daily power walk. Back then I'd played bunco with the middle-aged

mothers who had retired from caring about diapers and breast-feeding. That set rolled dice, drank hard liquor, and talked serious about puberty and pot, birth control, and college applications. As the stepmom of an adolescent, I'd needed them. These days I fit in better here, and my rare Florida basement space and my chair-moving muscles were forever at Char's service.

"Get three chairs. Get four. Get at least three," Char told me, and started counting the women again.

I handed her the stack of printed-out discussion questions and went back up. Every time I came down with another dining-room chair, I checked on our drop-in. Roux seemed fine, easy in her skin, moving group to group. Everyone I saw her speaking with seemed to smile a little wider, laugh a little louder. They were trying to impress her, and I couldn't blame them. Roux looked so interesting, like a woman with a passport full of stamps, who would know how to make pâté from scratch, who'd probably had sex in a moving vehicle. Maybe on the way here.

I came down with the last chair just in time to see Roux holding out a hand to shake with Tate Bonasco. I paused to watch. I couldn't help it. Tate had never recovered from being pretty in high school, and she brought an eau-de-tenth-grade-lunchroom to neighborhood politics. She called me "the pit bull" behind my back, partly because I had short, sandy hair and an athletic build, but also because I'd thwarted her book-club coup. When we outgrew Char's little house, she'd cited her big den as an excuse to jack the whole thing.

"It'll give Charlotte a break from planning it, too," she'd cooed, acting as if she were doing Char a favor.

I called her on it, saying out loud, in front of everyone, that Tate only wanted it because Char had worked so hard to make it shiny and popular, plus, with Tate at the helm we'd be reading Kardashian biographies every month.

It was bitchy, but losing the club would have broken Char's

heart. And it worked. In the end we moved to my large basement rec room with Char still in charge. Given the history, I couldn't help but enjoy watching standard-American-pretty Tate meet exotic Roux. Tate straightened, one hand going to smooth her hair, then excused herself to the restroom. Two minutes later she emerged with fresh lip gloss and her T-shirt knotted to show a strip of flat, tanned midriff.

Charlotte began banging out chimes on Lisa Fenton's wine-glass, then motioning with the spoon for everyone to find seats. Unfortunately, Roux happened to be standing in front of the leather wing chair. Roux didn't even look. She sank backward, and the wing chair received her. It was the tallest chair, the natural focal point of the circle, traditionally Charlotte's. Char jerked like she'd received a small electric shock when she looked up from herding ladies and saw Roux already settled there. I took a seat in one of the dining-room chairs that I'd pushed up against the fireplace and motioned Char to join me.

"Honestly," Char whispered as she sat next to me. "I mean, she didn't know, but you'd think someone would have mentioned."

Instead there'd been a minor traffic jam as five different women tried to claim the seats on either side of Roux.

"Next time I'll set the printouts in your chair to hold it," I said, and Charlotte brightened. She liked having a plan.

I was thinking that I wouldn't have to. Braless, rental-house Roux and her bird tats would not be back. She didn't strike me as a joiner, much less a woman who wanted to talk potty training and the lighter side of classic literature. She'd end up at bunco, or maybe nowhere, if her business got done fast enough.

Tate and Panda Grier finally closed the circle, cramming together on my padded piano bench. They'd made a quick dash to the wet bar for a final splash of wine, and no other seats were open.

Charlotte split the stack of printouts and sent pages both ways around the circle, saying, "Take one and pass, please." She culled

discussion questions from every book-club guide she could find on the Internet. “So how many of you finished *House of Mirth*?”

Almost every woman present put a hand up. Me, too.

She smiled, bright and approving, though I suspected that more than a few were lying. I sure was. I’d read most of it, but Oliver had been up and down all last night. When I rocked him to sleep this afternoon, he’d felt as toasty as a little jacket potato on my chest, his bald head reeking of delicious baby. I’d drifted off. We’d both slept hard and long. Madison had helped me throw together a dinner, and Davis had cleaned up after so I could skim Wikipedia to see how it ended.

“How many at least got partway through?” Char followed up, and now every hand was raised, including Roux’s. “Super, but if you didn’t finish, fair warning! Our talk will be chock-full of spoilers.”

“Oh, no, Lily Bart dies?” soft-hearted Sheridan Blake said on my other side. She’d been reading ahead in the discussion questions.

“Before we start, we have a new neighbor,” Charlotte said. “This is her first time at book club. Let’s all welcome . . . um, Roux.”

A murmur of hellos went around the circle, and Tate whispered something to Panda. Panda nodded, like always, but maybe less emphatically than usual. Panda Grier was top-heavy and matronly, with both a plain, sweet face and a delicious husband. She’d made Tate her best friend the minute the Bonascos moved in, petting her, bringing over fruit and coffee almost every morning. It was as if Panda thought Tate was a smoking-hot volcano god that must be propitiated, lest she erupt with sex all over Panda’s marriage.

Now Roux was in the room, an obvious expansion of a dangerous pantheon, and Tate was bristling at the competition. Panda couldn’t serve both gods, and I was small-town enough to wonder

how it would play out. I thought she'd likely stick by next-door Tate. The Sprite House was four blocks farther away from the beautiful Mr. Grier.

"Hello," Roux said. "Maybe y'all could introduce yourselves back?"

The contraction sounded wrong in her mouth, even though Pensacola, Florida, sat right between the ocean and Alabama. About half my neighbors had a soft southern slur, but Roux didn't sound like them. "We could go around the circle. I want to know who y'all are." Maybe she'd lived south long enough to pick it up.

I felt Charlotte's elbow jab my arm, hard enough to telegraph outrage.

"Well, but we all know each other. And we only have an hour," Charlotte said, in a voice that was sweeter than I knew she was feeling. One person grinding the whole club to a stop strictly for her own benefit was exactly the kind of thing that Charlotte hated. Char was addicted to fairness. It was one reason I loved her so. The world all around her was patently, consistently unfair, but Charlotte lived like a kid at the beach with a little red bucket, sure she could fix it so every ocean had the same amount of water.

I backed Char, saying, "Plus, we've got such a crowd tonight—how many names will you remember? If you come again, you'll get to know us naturally."

"You're right. I won't remember," Roux said, smiling at Char. Char smiled back and inhaled to speak again, but Roux talked in the gap, looking across the circle, right at Panda. "You're Panda, right? I remember that. Because it's unusual, sure, but also because you struck me as so funny." Tate's smile got brittle as Panda's whole face pinked up with pleasure. "But you aren't a Panda. Not at all. Not with those killer cheekbones and that sense of humor. Sly, sly, sly. You're a fox, aren't you?"

She leaned forward, intense, as if Panda Grier, who barely seemed to own cheekbones, was so just damn interesting. She

wasn't. We weren't. We were just regular women living near a college in a midsize seaside town. We were wives and moms, adjuncts and administrators, professors and librarians. *Roux* was interesting, elbows resting on her knees, her legs set wide, and her dress hiked up so the full skirt hung down between. Her thighs were trim and very pale, and she was wearing scuffed cowboy boots. I could feel her charisma like it was a wind she'd set loose in the room, pushing us all forward in our seats.

Panda, still blushing, said, "What do you mean? I should be named Fox?"

"Not at all," Roux said. "It's just you *are* one. Fox is your spirit animal." She said it as if this were a known thing. Like this pack of mommies, clutching our printed sheets and paperbacks, had spirit animals tucked under our chairs instead of designer leather bags we'd bought on the cheap, three seasons late, from TJ Maxx. I would have bet money that the number of women here who had ever spoken to a spirit animal could be counted on one finger. And that one was still talking. "What if we did that? Instead of a regular and—you are so right, Charlotte—useless formal introduction. If you each tell me your spirit animal . . . well, believe me, that's a thing that I'll remember."

Women in the circle were turning to one another, ripples of energy and whispers spreading. With someone like Roux listening, they wanted to talk. They wanted to have spirit animals, and they wanted to say them. I felt a spark of it, too, but this was Charlotte's club, and she was my best friend. Across the circle Tess Roberts was bright-faced and excited, while Liddy Sleight was uneasy, looking our way for a cue. Tate glowered, sending psychic demands for Char to shut this down. I felt us all wavering, as if we were balanced on a peak and the merest breath could blow us one way or the other.

Roux turned to Sheila Bowen on her right. "Lila? No, Sheila. Yeah? What kind of animal are you?"

“A tiger,” Sheila said promptly, and I felt us tip.

“I see that! You’ve got those yellow eyes, like some kind of huntress.” Roux said, and an affirming murmur ran around the circle. Sheila did have tiger eyes, but none of us had noticed that before. Roux said, “Keep going, keep going, I can hear,” as she got up and left the circle, heading for the wet bar.

She loaded every leftover wine bottle into her arms, though we usually all stopped pouring when we took our seats, finishing our last half drinks during the discussion. She plopped them clanking down onto the coffee table as Lavonda Gaffney introduced herself and claimed to be a lion fish.

I felt the elbow again. Harder. I gave Char a commiserating glance. Charlotte had had a rough first trimester, and all the vomiting had made her more impatient than she usually was.

Next to Lavonda, Tess was talking in her big, goose-honk voice, claiming to be a sparrow, while Roux twisted off all the screw caps.

Then Lisa Fenton introduced herself and said, “I’m in the red brick, between your house and Charlotte’s. Come over if you need sugar or an egg, whatever. As for my animal, that’s hard. I need to think.”

Roux was now making her way around the circle with two open bottles, nodding to Tess, saying, “Red or white?” soft, like a waitress.

Charlotte whispered to me, “This is a total hijack!”

I gave her an apologetic shrug.

“I think you’re a hawk. So there,” Sheridan Blake said.

Roux nodded, pouring cups and glasses to the rims, instantly affirming. “I can totally see that.”

Lisa blushed, so pleased, and said, “With three kids under five, I guess I have to be. I do see everything.”

I put a calming hand on Charlotte’s arm while Chloe Fischer declared that her spirit animal was “mama bear.” But then she

paused and added, "Or maybe I'm an egret?" She looked to Roux for confirmation.

"What's an egret?" Panda asked, which spawned a lot of explanations about seabirds, and everyone kept drinking, drinking, drinking.

Roux decided in the end. "Definitely a mama bear. It's just you're built so delicately, it's hard to see that bear inside you. But it's there."

Char leaned in and whispered, "Bear my butt. Chloe Fischer's just a monkey. We're all monkeys. That woman has us wearing cunning little hats and dancing on cue. How did she do that?"

I wasn't sure. Nothing had ever derailed Charlotte's rigorously scheduled book club. Nothing derailed Char's rigorously scheduled anything, and as much I loved her, I couldn't help but think this might be good for her. I couldn't help but find it interesting.

Shy Allie Whitaker was playing now, peeping up from under her bangs and claiming that she might be a tiger, too. Inside. Very, very deep.

"Yeah, you have some jungle teeth hidden in you. I can see them," Roux said, and Allie shrugged, almost wriggling in her pleasure.

Char kept checking the clock, watching the minutes leak away, as the women picked animals and emptied the glasses that Roux kept sloshing full. I knew Char'd been looking forward to talking about beautiful Lily Bart, drifting to her doom by inches; the whole discussion hour was nearly gone, and we hadn't even started the questions.

Roux kept pouring, egging them on, until they were talking over one another, all claiming to be piranhas or panthers or peacocks. The only true peacock in our bunch was Tate Bonasco, who had bee-stung lips and (Char believed) a boob job. And even she would be a zoo peacock.

Truthfully, we were domesticated animals, all of us, except for Roux. She hadn't said her animal, but I thought it must be wild,

or maybe feral.

The wine was nearly gone, and Roux was back at the bar, making up a mixed drink like she lived here, though the last thing any woman in this room needed was more alcohol. The conversation was so loud and rowdy now, women slurring and cackling, that I was glad all the bedrooms were up on the second floor. Oliver slept light, and Davis got so uncomfortable when folks were sloppy drunk.

Roux came back to the circle just as it was my turn. She handed me the mixed drink, and I was surprised at how observant she was. I hated wine. Could not bear even the flat, sour smell of it. I drank gin and tonic, but my first had been a very light pour. After that my drinks had been gin in name only, like always. “One-Drink Whey,” Davis called me.

I took a sip, and it was piney and brisk. Cold in my mouth, but so strong that I felt it as a heat by the time it reached my chest. No way I would drink much of this, though it was delicious. She’d rubbed the rim of the glass with fresh lime, a tart finish on my tongue.

Still, loyal to Char, I only said, “I’m feeling like a porcupine. A porcupine who really wants to talk about *The House of Mirth*. Maybe we could—”

“We’re almost done,” Roux said, wiping my words away with a lazy wave of her hand. I was surprised at how much I minded the dismissal. She’d made a fuss over all the selections, so opinionated, finding an animal that made every woman there feel good. Until me. I wasn’t anything like a porcupine, but she accepted it as my animal, when I’d meant it as a dig. She’d already turned her gaze on Charlotte. “Of course I know your name, but your animal is tricky.”

“I’m a porcupine, too,” Char said, tight, and popped her lips shut.

Roux sized up Charlotte, eyes lingering on the roundness of

her belly, just now starting to look like more than a big lunch.

“I think *this* is Kanga,” Roux said, and shot a sly smile at me. As if we had a private joke. The warmth of being included, after that dismissal—I felt it. I won’t deny I felt it. My mouth smiled without my permission. Charlotte’s eyebrows went up so high they disappeared into her bangs, and I hid my face in my strong drink. I took a long, deep swallow. Roux went back to Char’s usurped chair.

Finally Jenny Tugby, who was as warm and bland and comforting as oatmeal, claimed to be a Komodo dragon and said she had to get home. Her baby hadn’t started cereal yet, and she was flexing her shoulders and pulling at her bra. Her breasts had her on a timer, and she needed to go pump and dump her wine-soaked milk. Oliver and I were down to nursing first thing in the morning and at bedtime, but I remembered that tight, skin-stretch feeling from early days, back when my body made everything that fed him. I couldn’t blame her, but at the same time humans were herd animals. As soon as she broke the circle, others would feel it as a pull to take their leave.

Sure enough, as Char finally got to begin her questions, women started leaking away in pairs and singles, quietly, with apologetic waves. First the ones with the newest babies, then the ones with full-time jobs. Most of these light-drinking ladies were rambley and yawning, listing as they disappeared up the stairs. By ten o’clock there were only six of us left.

Tate and Panda had joined Lavonda the Lion Fish on the sofa now that the room had cleared. Tate was very full of pinot noir, with a sweaty forehead and her mouth stained purple at the corners. Roux was back at the bar, slicing up more of my limes on the cutting board.

Charlotte said, “Maybe we should call it.” She looked tired, with pink circles under her eyes.

Roux said, “Definitely. That book was a nonstarter. We should do something else.” She blinked, and her neck elongated, as if a

clever thought had only now occurred to her. "I know. Let's play a game."

Char bristled. "That's not what I meant at all."

"It is getting late," I said, trying for loyal, but I was tempted by the idea of a game.

I'd chosen a husband who liked meat loaf on Monday, tacos on Tuesday, dinner out on Friday with sex after. Charlotte was a lot like Davis; I was naturally attracted to anything orderly. But now I had a baby. I loved Oliver in a whole-body way I'd never known existed, but every day with a baby was the same day.

The closer he came to weaning, the more I missed teaching at Divers Down, both the joy of introducing new divers to the secret world under the waves and the color and noise of the kids in my swim and Seal Team classes. Most of all I missed diving itself. No one dives pregnant, and these first eight months of motherhood had been a sleep-deprived blur. I'd gotten under only half a dozen times since Oliver came, and I was starting to get truly itchy for it.

Now, if Roux had suggested a bank job or even a bungee jump, I would have shown her to the door, and this last gaggle of tipsy mummies alongside her. But staying up past ten on a weeknight to play a game? It was a rebellion that sounded about my speed. I wanted to play.

"Too late to start a game, I think," Charlotte agreed, trying to sound regretful but not quite making it.

"Poor Kanga," Roux said to her. "You should definitely head on home. You're resting for two."

"Yesh, s'fine. You go on home, Kangaroo," Tate slurred, cutting her eyes at Roux. She'd been very quiet so far tonight, drinking her resentment.

But Char had meant for everyone to go. It was her club, and she was closing it. She paused, and I knew she didn't want to leave me with some of my least favorite neighbors, all three already drunk, and this usurping stranger. I was torn, wanting to see what

happened, but at the same time I didn't want to end up cleaning Tate Bonasco's vomit out of my sofa.

"I do not like this," Charlotte said to me. "Not one little bit."

Roux was carrying limes and rocks glasses and my room-temp gin back to the coffee table. She overheard Char, and a sly smile spread across her face.

"You aren't a porcupine," Roux said, setting out the glasses and expertly pouring shots, not measuring. "You aren't Kanga either. I know you, lady. You're that fish. That orange fish in a bowl from *The Cat in the Hat*. That's your spirit animal."

"Oh, my God, you are," Lavonda said, laughing so hard she choked.

"Roux should not be here when your mother is out," Tate said in an uptight Fish voice, reaching across a giggling Panda to pat Lavonda's back.

"Go get some sleep. We're almost done here," I assured Char, turning her toward the stairs before she had a rage stroke.

"Yes," Roux said, "Amy, you play Up-Up-Up with a fish," making herding motions toward the stairs, and that put the sloshed trio on the sofa into hysterics.

Char stomped up ahead of me, the back of her neck crimson.

"Hey, did you really read the book?" Tate asked over the laughing, so loud we heard it at the tip-top of the stairs. "Because I only read the Spark Notes."

I closed the door to the basement.

"Good grief!" Char whispered with a fierceness that I rarely saw in her. "How will you ever get them out of here?"

"I don't know," I said.

Except for pregnant Charlotte, I was the soberest woman in the house. Even so, I could feel the gin in my veins. I took another little sip. I wanted to be back downstairs playing, not up here disapproving. Still, loyalty had me walk Char to the door, nodding agreement as she whisper-railed.

“Who comes into someone’s house, someone’s club, and takes it over and makes everybody drunk and stupid? If I were you, I would go right up to bed and just leave them there to realize how stinking rude they’re being. Except I wouldn’t trust that Roux not to steal something.”

Upstairs, Davis would be in bed reading with an ear cocked for the baby monitor. Oliver was no doubt enjoying the sleep of the innocent, his arms thrown up over his head. I was naïve enough to assume that my stepdaughter Madison was upstairs in bed, too.

“Yeah, that was pretty . . .” I trailed off, because what word came next?

Interesting.

Which, though I’d never say it out loud, book club often wasn’t. Char’s selections were heavy on Ladies and Society. She liked white-gloved books that explored long-dead social mores. On my own I read high-stakes fiction: Margaret Atwood, Stephen King. Or memoirs like *The Glass Castle* and *Wild*, the ones by women who’d lived risky and survived.

I understood, maybe better than anyone, that the saying “May you live in interesting times” was the cruelest curse that could be laid. I didn’t want my life to be interesting ever, ever again, but I liked interesting on paper, contained between closable covers. I didn’t mind this Roux person hijacking our decorous, mild fun. Just this once.

To Char I said, “We can discuss *House of Mirth* ourselves, after our walk tomorrow,” and I resolved to get up early and read the last third. I would give Char her book talk, to make up for this disloyalty. For thinking, for just a moment, *Dear God, she really is a little like that orange fish, fussing in his bowl*. “I’ll make us lunch, and we’ll do every question.”

Char’s eyes pricked with tears, the pregnancy hormones maxing out every emotion, and then she lurched at me and hugged me. I hugged her back, tight, feeling the arc of her inflating belly

pressing against my hip. Char's extended family was very small. An elderly, unwell father and a military brother who'd married a German girl and still lived overseas. I was nearly estranged from my own family as well. It was one reason we were so close, forming a do-it-yourself support system.

"God, you're so nice to me. And I am such a whiner," she said. "Okay, okay. See you tomorrow."

I opened the front door for her, and there was Madison. She stood barefoot on the grass by the lowest porch step. She was wearing an outsize T-shirt that she often slept in, but under it she'd pulled on black leggings. Out on the lawn, just past her, the pale face of a boy floated in the moonlight, his dark clothes and darker hair blending into the night. I drew up short.

Char whispered, "That's Roux's kid."

Madison turned when she heard us coming out, smiling and lifting a casual hand. She didn't act like someone who'd been caught. She wasn't doing anything wrong, after all. Just talking on the lawn, still within the golden halo of porch light, safe. I didn't like it, though.

"Hey, Mads," I said, like I'd known she was out here the whole time. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Luca," she said. "He's new. Luca, this is my stepmonster, Amy."

"Sup," Luca said, not reacting to my nickname. He jerked his chin by way of greeting. He had his mother's hair but his own face. It was very angular, with long, narrow eyes and a sulky rock-star mouth. His black T-shirt had some kind of band logo on it, and he'd paired it with ripped, dark jeans and shitkicker boots. He looked as if central casting had sent over Boy Trouble.

"Nice to meet you, Luca," Char said, stiff. She didn't like it either. "I'm Charlotte Baxter."

"Nice to meet you," I echoed. "Mads? It's about time you came on in. School night."

“Oh, no, Monster, really? Ten minutes?” she said.

“I think now is good,” I said, mild, but I flashed her a wicked-stepmother face, so that she knew I was about to become so embarrassing.

She rolled her eyes at me but said, “See you tomorrow,” and turned to the steps.

“Later,” Luca said, and he went slouching off into the darkness.

“Mm,” Char said to me. “I’ll see *you* tomorrow.” She gave me a look that said we now had more than a book to talk about, then started off home.

Maddy pushed past me into the house, saying, “It’s barely even ten, *A-my*.” She bore down hard, very judgmental, on the first syllable, the way she sometimes called Davis “*Da-ad*” when they were close to getting into it.

She never used to say my name this way before Oliver was born. The baby had changed so many things. These days I sometimes forgot that I’d loved Maddy first, falling for her the very day Char brought the Wheys to Divers Down, close to seven years ago. Char’d told Davis that Seal Team was exactly what his unhappy kid needed—friends, fun, physical activity. Char had been doing a little matchmaking, introducing her single swimming teacher and her handsome, divorced neighbor. But when I first met Davis, an econ prof in button-down shirts and penny loafers, he struck me as an uptight ass. My heart had gone out to nine-year-old Madison, with her puppy-fat belly sticking out from under her crop top and her eyebrows set in a permanent scowl.

That scowl had not changed, and she gave it to me full force over her shoulder as I followed her in. Then she went stomping up the stairs to her room with no idea that the basement still held a gaggle of bombed book-clubbers.

I took a final bracing sip of G&T, then set the glass on the counter. I could feel gin buzzing in my hands, and this right here was about as tipsy as I got. Ever. I opened the door to the base-

ment. I could hear them cackling. I shut the door fast behind me and started down, hurrying so as not to miss anything more.

Tate was saying, "Everybody does that. It's just some people lie about it. It isn't *bad*."

Panda talked over her, saying, "No, no, I know, like, I'm not a prude or anything. It's just that Francis, he barely ever wants to . . . you know. When it happens, it's great and all, but he's . . . he's . . ."

"He's a sex camel," Roux finished for her as I got to the bottom of the stairs, and they all laughed.

They sat on the floor, four women inside a fairy ring of abandoned chairs, clustered around the coffee table. It was littered with sucked-dry lime wedges and paper plates crusted with the dregs of hummus and onion dip. Each woman held a rocks glass with a finger of my good gin in the bottom. Judging by the level in the bottle, they'd already done a shot, maybe two, while I'd been busy shoeing Maddy inside.

"A *what* camel?" Lavonda said. "Is that a spirit ammimal?"

"No, no," Tate said, superior and drunk-wise. "I get it. She means that Francis stores up his humps."

They burst into noisy laughter again. Only Roux saw me. She was sitting like the north point of the compass, facing the stairs. Lavonda had her back to me, and Tate and Panda were the drunken witches of the east and west, in profile. Roux's eyes lit as they met mine. We grinned at each other, neither of us half as drunk as they were.

"Then you took matters into your own hands. So to speak," Lavonda said, giggling. "But that doesn't count as bad."

"Well, but you have to take into consideration that I didn't take things into my own *hands*," Panda said, sounding sly.

"Panda, you doglet! Do you actually own a . . ." Tate made a *bzzzzz* noise, as if this were subtler than saying "vibrator." It wasn't.

"I mos' certainly do not," said Panda, smug. "But they make those disposable toothbrushes now. You know the kind? With bat-

teries?”

Roux snorted, laughing now, too. “Okay, but I still think Lavonda’s winning. That’s gross, not *bad*.”

“Except I brush my teeth with a regular old Oral-B,” Panda said, and then there was a pause. She made them wait for it, but I got there first and felt a bubble of shocked laughter rising. “Only Francis brushes with the battery-powered kind.”

Then they were all laughing like a pack of jackals, covering my own laughter. Poor Francis! I would never be able to look at his lovely white teeth in the same way again.

“Oh, my God,” Lavonda said, lifting her plastic cup. A good inch of clear liquid sloshed around in the bottom. “You got me. You have the lead.”

“Tate?” Roux said, lofting her own glass. “I don’t think you can beat that. Drink.”

“Hold on!” Tate said, sitting up very straight. Panda never beat Tate at anything. Tate leaned in. “I frenched a guy last week. Not my husband. Boom, bitches. Why don’t y’all drink to *that*.”

The hilarity drained instantly. Silence from Panda. Silence from Lavonda. I found myself stepping in closer.

“Who?” Panda said, and there was such outrage in her voice that even sloppy-drunk Tate seemed to hear it. “Who was it? Someone we know? Someone’s husband?”

Tate backpedaled. “God, no! No one you know.”

I did not believe this.

“Well, that wins,” Roux said, wry, and drained her cup.

Panda and Lavonda were still staring at Tate.

“You let him?” Panda said.

Tate said, “No, no, I pushed him right away. I guess I . . . felt sorry. He was saying how his wife was pregnant and she was being the sex camel. I felt bad for him, you know? He misread it, and he tried something. I shut it down. Of course. Not a big deal. Panda wins. Here, I’ll drink.” She guzzled at her cup.

I was reverberating with a second shock. Pregnant? Did she mean Charlotte's husband? Surely not. The world was full of pregnant women. Just because Char was the only pregnant person in our neighborhood right now, it didn't mean Tate had started something up with Phillip Baxter.

"Who was it, Tate?" I had to know. I couldn't stand here, passive, eavesdropping. Tate turned her head to peer at me with owlish eyes. I don't think she'd realized I was back until that moment. Her eyes widened, and her face flushed a deep, dark red. Panda and Lavonda were her inner circle, but I was Charlotte's. Tate couldn't look away from me, and I could see drunk wheels spinning in her head.

"Just a guy I met . . . um, at the car place. We were stuck in that waiting room, and we got talking," she said, overloud, looking right at me, and she was lying.

"It's just a game, y'all," Roux said, getting up. "Panda won. Come join us for the next round, Amy."

She walked toward me, slow and slinky, like a parody of a fifties housewife, carrying a glass with a shot of gin the bottom.

I couldn't look away from Tate, who was now aiming her eyes anywhere but at me. She told Lavonda and Panda, "He got the wrong idea. They shunt've named that place Quickie Lube," and Lavonda snorted and laughed, reassured. I didn't. I wasn't. It was Phillip. She had done something with my best friend's husband. I knew it even before Tate peeped at me to see if I'd been taken in by her weak lies and her joke.

I said, "This game? It doesn't seem all that fun to me," to Roux, but I held my gaze level and serious on Tate. She flushed and looked away fast.

Roux sidestepped between us, blocking my view. "It's a blast. You should play. It's like Never Have I Ever, but for grown-ups. We skip the coy denials and go right to confession. You start by telling everyone the worst thing you did today."

That last sentence made me feel as if Roux were running one overly cool, lacquered nail tip down my naked spine. It straightened me into Good Girl posture, shoulders back and down, eyes widened into instant innocence.

“Sure. I’ll play,” I said quietly, to Roux alone. “The worst thing I did today was let you get this pack of harpies drunk in my house.”

Roux laughed and waved away my entry. “We’re past that round now.”

Over at the coffee table, Tate said, “Let’s keep going! Lavonda, what’s the very worst thing you did last month?”

I felt Roux watching my reaction. I asked her, sharp, “Last month?”

Roux shrugged.

“No, but wait, were you flirting with the car-place guy? If it was all him, why is it *your* worst?” Panda asked with dogged, drunken logic.

Tate said, “I must have been putting out a signal, is why it’s my worst. But, like, for real, unconsciously.”

“Women blame themselves,” Lavonda said, trying to smooth it over. “But it’s the man. It’s the penis. It’s the man penis that causes all the troubles.”

“Last month?” I repeated, gaze fixed on Roux. “You said it was a game about today.”

Roux said, “Round one was today. I won it. This was round two, where we all told the worst thing we did last week.”

Last week meant the beer-soaked Back-to-School party Tate had hosted around her pool, I remembered, trying to do infidelity math inside my head. Davis and I had made a brief appearance with Oliver, while Maddy stayed the whole time, basking and splashing with the small pack of neighborhood teens. Char had been there, plopped miserably in a deck chair, sipping ginger ale and eating saltines. Her husband had been pounding down the Rolling Rocks, and Tate’s husband had been micromanaging the brats on the Big

Green Egg. With Phillip drunk and Tate unsupervised, I hoped for Char's sake it had stopped at just a kiss. But I couldn't worry only about Char right now. Right now I could barely breathe.

"And then round three is . . ." I heard myself saying in an airless voice.

"You say the worst thing you did last month, and if yours is the most awful, then everyone else has to drink," Roux said, eyes on mine, unblinking. "Then we tell the worst things we did last year. And so on."

The three drunken furies at the coffee table were bickering now, locked in their own tension. It rendered them oblivious to ours, but I felt it. Our tension was a long, lithe ribbon winding around us. It squeezed in, cold-blooded and well muscled, binding the two of us together.

"Ish the penis that starts it, but sometimes the vagina *can* send a signal," Lavonda pontificated.

"What kind of signal?" Panda said. No doubt wondering if Tate's vagina was signaling her own very tasty husband. But no, Tate had it aimed at Charlotte's.

But all I could manage right now was asking Roux, "How many rounds? How far does it go?"

"Oh, come on, Amy. A good game has to go all the way," Roux said, and her pink tongue came out for just a moment to touch her pale upper lip. "Think back. What's the worst thing you ever did?"

Somehow that rocks glass was in my hand. She'd put it in there, or I'd taken it. I felt the rim at my mouth. From a distance I observed One-Drink Whey slamming down a shot of room-temp gin. But I needed the heat. My whole body had gone corpse cold.

I couldn't make sense of the angry words the others were saying now. It sounded like cats hissing and growling around my near-empty bottle of Hendrick's. Their sound faded as Roux leaned in, close. Intimate. Like she had a secret to share, and I was leaning as well. As if I wanted to hear it.

“You don’t want to play? That makes no sense,” she said, and her spirit animal was a more sinister version of the Cat in the Hat. Hers was feral, invading to unpack trouble in a house where no mother would ever come home. In this house I was the only mother, and I had let trouble in. I’d swung the door wide for it, hoped it had the right house, even. “Because, Amy? C’mon. You would win this. I’m thinking you got these low-stakes bitches on lockdown.”

“Get out,” I said, soft, a thousand underwater yards beneath the drunken, sniping women on my floor around my coffee table.

Roux heard me, though. She was down here with me, standing exactly as she had when I first saw her on my porch, head tilted, hip cocked. She spread her hands palms up, and I was shot through with a painful feeling that was akin to pleasure. Her hands were not empty after all. They were holding my history, invisible but so very heavy. I could almost see it in her hands.

“Oh, yeah. You would win.”

“That’s not true,” I said, but I was still leaning toward her, as if I wanted more. At the same time, her sentences ran through my mind in triplets, like the first movement of the “Moonlight” Sonata, played poorly in a minor key. *You’d win this. You’d win this. You would win.* Every sour chord telegraphed itself on my numb face. *Guilty*, and she saw it.

“Come by my place. Soon. We have a lot to talk about,” Roux said.

“Get out,” I repeated, and she brushed past me to the stairs.

I turned to watch her rise. Behind me I could hear Tate retching and Lavonda saying, “Oh, shit, grab that trash can!” and Panda crying out, “Oh, no!”

I wanted to run up the stairs after Roux, chase her to the front door and drive her out, bolt it, draw the chain. But it would do no good. She’d cracked open the past. I could feel it leaking into my bloodstream, spreading like a toxin through me. She’d brought interesting times. She’d let them loose inside me.