

**Copyrighted Material**

# *William*

FEBRUARY 1960—DECEMBER 1978

FOR THE FIRST SIX DAYS OF WILLIAM WATERS'S LIFE, HE WAS NOT an only child. He had a three-year-old sister, a redhead named Caroline. There were silent home movies of Caroline in which William's father looked like he was laughing, a sight William never saw again. His father's face looked open, and the tiny redhead, who pulled her dress over her face and ran in giggling circles in one of the movies, was apparently the reason. Caroline developed a fever and a cough while William and his mother were in the hospital after his birth. When they came home, the little girl seemed to be on the mend, but the cough was still bad, and when her parents went into her room to get her one morning, they found her dead in her crib.

William's parents never mentioned Caroline while William was growing up. There was one photograph of her on the end table in the living room, which William traveled to occasionally in order to convince himself that he'd actually had a sister. The family moved to a navy-shingled house on the other side of Newton—a suburb of Boston—and in that house, William was an only child. His father was an accountant who worked long hours downtown. With his daughter gone, the man's face never opened again. William's mother smoked cigarettes and drank bourbon in the living room, sometimes alone and sometimes with a female neighbor. She had a collection of ruffled

aprons that she wore while preparing meals, and she became agitated whenever one became stained or messy.

“Maybe you shouldn’t wear the aprons while you cook,” William said once, when his mother was red-faced and on the verge of tears over a dark blotch of gravy on the fabric. “You could tuck a dish towel in your belt instead, like Mrs. Kornet does.”

His mother looked at him as if he’d spoken in Greek. William said, “Mrs. Kornet, who lives next door? Her dish towel?”

From the age of five, William would walk to the nearby park most afternoons with a basketball, because basketball, unlike baseball or football, was a game he could play alone. There was a neglected outdoor court that usually had a hoop free, and he would shoot for hours, pretending he was a Celtics player. Bill Russell was his favorite, but to be Russell you needed someone else to block or defend against. Sam Jones was the best shooter, so William was usually Jones. He tried to imitate the guard’s perfect shooting form while pretending the trees that surrounded the court were cheering fans.

One afternoon when he was ten years old, he showed up at the court and found it occupied. Boys—maybe six of them, about William’s age—were chasing one another and a ball between the hoops. William started to back away, but one of the boys called, “Hey, wanna play?” And then, without waiting for William to answer: “You’re on the blue team.” Within seconds, William was swept into the game, his heart pounding in his chest. A kid passed him the ball, and he passed it right back, afraid to shoot and miss and be told he was terrible. A few minutes later, the game broke up abruptly because someone needed to get home, and the boys spilled off the court in different directions. William walked home, his heart still rattling in his chest. After that, the boys were occasionally on the court when William showed up with his ball. There was no discernible schedule to their appearances, but they always waved him into the game as if he were one of them. This never stopped being shocking to William. Kids and adults had always looked past him, as if he were invisible. His parents hardly looked at him at all. William had accepted all of this and thought it was understandable; he was, after all, boring and forgettable. His primary characteristic was pallor: He had sand-colored hair,

light-blue eyes, and the very white skin shared by people of English and Irish descent. On the inside, William knew, he was as uninteresting and muted as his looks. He never spoke at school, and no one played with him. But the boys on the basketball court offered William a chance to be part of something for the first time, without having to talk.

In fifth grade, the gym teacher at his elementary school said, “I see you out there shooting baskets in the afternoons. How tall is your father?”

William stared at the man blankly. “I’m not sure. Normal height?”

“Okay, so you’ll probably be a point guard. You need to work on your handle. You know Bill Bradley? That gawky guy on the Knicks? When he was a kid, he taped cardboard to his glasses so he couldn’t look down, couldn’t see his feet. And then he dribbled up and down the sidewalk wearing those glasses. He looked crazy, no doubt, but his handle got real tight. He has a perfect feel for how the ball will bounce and how to find it without looking.”

William sprinted home that afternoon, his entire body buzzing. This was the first time a grown-up had looked directly at him—noticed him, and noticed what he was doing—and the attention threw him into distress. William had a sneezing fit while he was digging for a pair of toy glasses in the back of his desk drawer. He visited the bathroom twice before he carefully taped rectangular pieces of cardboard to the bottom of the glasses.

Whenever William felt sick or odd, he worried he was going to die. At least once a month he would crawl under his covers after school, convinced he was terminally ill. He wouldn’t tell his parents, because illness wasn’t permitted in his house. Coughing, in particular, was treated as a horrific betrayal. When William had a cold, he allowed himself to cough only in his closet with the door closed, his face muffled by the row of hanging button-down shirts he had to wear for school. He was aware of that familiar worry tickling his shoulders and the back of his head while he ran outside with the ball and glasses. But William had no time for illness now, no time for fear. This felt like the final click of his identity falling into place. The boys on the court had recognized him, and the gym teacher had too. William might have had

no idea who he was, but the world had told him: He was a basketball player.

The gym teacher gave him additional tips that allowed William to develop more skills. “For defense: Push kids away with your shoulder and your butt. The refs won’t call those as fouls. Do sprints: Get a quick first step and beat your man off the dribble.” William worked on his passing too, so he could feed the ball to the best players in the park. He wanted to keep his place on the court, and he knew that if he made the other boys better, he had value. He learned where to run to provide space for the shooters to cut in to. He set screens so they could take their favorite shots. The boys slapped William on the back after a successful play, and they always wanted him on their side. This acceptance calmed some of the fear William carried inside him; on the basketball court, he knew what to do.

By the time William entered high school, he was a good-enough player to start for the varsity team. He was five foot eight and played point guard. His hours of practice with the glasses had paid off; he was by far the best dribbler on the team, and he had a nice midrange jumper. He’d worked on his rebounding, which helped offset his team’s turnovers. Passing was still William’s best skill, and his teammates appreciated that they had better games when he was in the lineup. He was the only freshman on the varsity team, and so when his older teammates drank beer in the basement of whoever’s parents were willing to look the other way, William was never invited. His teammates were shocked—everyone was shocked—when, in the summer after his sophomore year, William grew five inches. Once he started growing, his body seemed unable to stop, and by the end of high school he was six foot seven. He couldn’t eat enough to keep up with his growth and became shockingly thin. His mother looked frightened when he lurched into the kitchen every morning, and she’d hand him a snack whenever he passed nearby. She seemed to think his skinniness reflected badly on her, because feeding him was her job. His parents sometimes came to his basketball games, but at odd intervals, and they sat politely in the stands, appearing not to know anyone on the court.

His parents weren’t there for the game when William went for a

rebound and was shoved in the air. His body twisted while he fell, and he landed awkwardly on his right knee. The joint absorbed all of the impact, and all of his weight. William heard his knee make a noise, and then a fog descended. His coach, who seemed to have only two registers—shouting and mumbling—was yelling in his ear: “You okay, Waters?” William generally responded to both the shouts and the mumbles by phrasing everything he said as a question; he never felt sure enough to lay claim to a statement. He cleared his throat. The fog around him, and inside him, was dense and laced with pain that was radiating from his knee. He said, “No.”

He'd fractured his kneecap, which meant he would miss the last seven weeks of his junior-year season. William's leg was immobilized with a cast, and he was on crutches for two months. What this meant was that for the first time since he was five years old, he was unable to play basketball. William sat on the desk chair in his room and threw crumpled-up paper into the bin by the far wall. The clouds that had descended with the injury remained; his skin felt damp and cold. The doctor had told him that he would make a full recovery and be able to play in his senior-year season, but still, William felt slightly panicked every minute of the day. Time became strange too. He felt like he would be locked in this cast, in this chair, in this house, forever. He began to think that he couldn't do this, couldn't sit inside this broken body any longer. He thought of his sister, how Caroline was gone. He thought about her gone-ness, which he didn't understand, but as the clock hand labored from one minute to the next, he wished that he were gone too. Off the basketball court, he had no usefulness. No one would miss him. If he disappeared, it would be like he'd never existed. No one spoke of Caroline, and no one would speak of him. Only when William's leg was finally freed from the cast, and he could run and shoot again, did the fog and the thoughts of disappearing recede.

Thanks to his decent grades and promise as a basketball player, William was offered a handful of scholarships from colleges with Division I basketball programs. He was grateful for the scholarships, because his parents had never indicated that they would pay for college, and because he took it as a promise of guaranteed basketball. William wanted to leave Boston—he'd never been more than ninety miles

from the city center—but the swampy heat of the South made him nervous, so he accepted a scholarship from Northwestern University, in Chicago. In late August 1978, William kissed his mother goodbye at the train station and shook his father's hand. With his palm pressed against his father's, William had the strange thought that he might never see his parents again—that they'd only ever had one child, and it wasn't him.

IN COLLEGE, WILLIAM GRAVITATED toward history classes when filling his schedule. He had what felt like gaping holes to fill in his knowledge of how the world worked, and it appeared to him that history had the answers. He appreciated that the academic subject looked at disparate events and found a pattern. *If* this happened, *then* this happened. Nothing was completely random, and therefore a line could be drawn from the assassination of an Austrian archduke to a world war. College life was too new to be predictable, and William struggled to find any sense of equilibrium in the face of excited students who offered him high fives while he made his way down the noisy hallway in his dorm. He divided his days between studying in the library, practicing on the basketball court, and attending classes. In each of these locations, he knew what to do. He sank into every classroom chair, opened his notebook, and felt his body sag with relief when the professor began to talk.

William rarely noticed other students during classes, but Julia Padavano stood out in his European history seminar because her face appeared to be lit up with indignation and because she drove the professor—an elderly Englishman who held an oversized handkerchief balled in one fist—crazy with her questions. Her long, curly hair shifted around her bright face like curtains while she said things like: *Professor, I'm interested in the role of Clementine in all of this. Isn't it true that she was Churchill's main adviser? Or: Can you explain the wartime coding system? I mean the specifics of how it worked? I'd like to see an example.*

William never spoke in class or utilized the professor's office hours. He believed that the role of a student was to keep his or her mouth

shut and soak up as much knowledge as possible. He shared the professor's opinion of the curly-haired girl, which was that her frequent interjections and inquiries, though often interesting to William, were impolite. The fabric of a serious classroom was created by students listening and the professor providing wisdom in a carefully unrolled carpet of words; this girl poked holes in that fabric, as if she didn't even know it existed.

William was startled one afternoon after class when she appeared at his elbow and said, "Hello. My name is Julia."

"William. Hi." He had to clear his throat; this might have been the first time he'd spoken that day. The girl was regarding him with wide, serious eyes. He noticed that in the sunlight her brown hair had honey-colored highlights. She looked lit up, from without and within.

"Why are you so tall?"

It wasn't unusual for people to remark on William's height; he understood that his size was a surprise whenever he entered a room and that most people felt compelled to say something. Several times a week he heard, *How's the air up there?*

Julia looked suspicious when she asked the question, though, and her expression made him laugh. He stopped on the path that crisscrossed the quad, and so she stopped too. William rarely laughed, and his hands tingled, as if they'd just woken up from an oxygen-deprived sleep. The overall sensation was one of being pleasantly tickled. Later, William would look back at this moment and know that this was when he fell for her. Or, more accurately, when his body fell for her. In the middle of the quad, attention from a specific girl reeled in laughter from the nooks and crannies within him. William's body—tired and bored by his hesitant mind—had to set off fireworks in his nerves and muscles to alert him that something of import was taking place.

"Why are you laughing?" Julia said.

He managed to mostly tamp it down. "Please, don't be offended," he said.

She gave an impatient nod. "I'm not."

"I don't know why I'm so tall." Secretly, though, he believed that he'd willed himself to this height. A serious basketball player needed



to be at least six foot three, and William had cared about that so badly that he'd somehow defied his genetics. "I'm on the basketball team here."

"At least you're making a virtue of it, then," she said. "Perhaps I'll come to see one of your games. I generally don't take an interest in sports, and I only come to campus for classes." She paused, and then said quickly, as if embarrassed, "I live at home to save money."

Julia told him to write her phone number on his history notebook, and before she walked away he'd agreed to call her the next night. It was to some extent irrelevant whether he'd fallen for her or not. In the middle of the quad, this young woman seemed to have decided they would be boyfriend and girlfriend. Later, she would tell him that she'd been watching him in class for weeks and liked how attentive and serious he was. "Not silly, like the other boys," she said.

Even after he met Julia, basketball still took up most of William's time and thoughts. He'd been the best player on his high school team; at Northwestern, he was dismayed to discover he was among the weakest. On this team, his height wasn't enough to set him apart, and the other young men were stronger than he was. Most of them had been weight lifting for a few years, and William was panicked not to have known to do the same. He was easily shoved aside, knocked over, during practices. He started going to the weight room before practice and stayed on the court late to drill shots from different angles. He was hungry all the time and kept extra sandwiches in his jacket pockets. He realized that his role on this team would probably be as a "glue guy." He was good enough at passing, shooting, and defense to make himself useful, even though he wasn't a gifted athlete. His most valuable skill was that he rarely made mistakes on the court. "High basketball IQ, but no hops," William heard one of the coaches say about him, when they didn't know he was within earshot.

His scholarship required that he work a job on campus, and from the list of possibilities, he chose the one that took place in the gym building, because it would be convenient for basketball. He reported to the laundry facility in the sub-basement of the enormous building at the assigned time, where he was confronted by a skinny woman

with a tall Afro and glasses. She shook her head and said, "You're in the wrong place. They told you to come here? White boys don't get assigned to laundry. You need to get yourself to the library or the student rec center. Go on."

William looked down the stretch of the long narrow room. There was a row of thirty washing machines on one wall and thirty dryers on the other. It was true that as far as he could see, no one else was white.

"Why does it matter?" he said. "I want to do this job. Please."

She shook her head again, and her glasses waggled on her nose, but before she could speak, a hand clapped William on the back and a deep voice said his name. He turned to see one of the other freshmen on the basketball team, a strong power forward named Kent. Kent had nearly the opposite set of basketball skills from William: He was a supreme athlete who dunked theatrically, crashed the boards, and sprinted every minute he was in the game, but he made bad reads on plays, caused multiple turnovers, and never knew where to be on defense. The coach gripped his head while he watched Kent run the court, presumably reeling at the disparity between the young man's physical potential and his high-speed, erratic play.

"Hey, man," Kent said. "You working down here too? I can show him the ropes, if you like, ma'am." Kent gave the stern woman a wide, charming smile.

She softened and said, "Okay, fine, then. Take him off my hands and I'll pretend he's not here."

From that point on, William and Kent timed their shifts in the laundry so they could work side by side. They washed hundreds of towels and the uniforms for every team. Football uniforms were the worst, because of the smell and deep grass stains that required a special bleach to be scrubbed into the fabric. William and Kent developed a rhythm to each step of the laundry process; with their focus on timing and efficiency, the work felt like an extension of basketball practice. They used the time to break down plays and figure out how their team could improve.

One afternoon, while they were folding an enormous pile of towels, William explained, "It goes: Guard-to-guard pass to initiate, for-

ward comes off the baseline screen, and a guard screens down for the big.” William paused to make sure Kent was following. “If the pass goes to the big, the small steps out to the corner and the other forward comes off that screen, and the other guard screens down on the weak side.”

“Picking the picker.”

“That’s right, and if the big passes to the forward, then the flex continuity repeats.”

“Too predictable! Coach wants us running the same thing over and over. . . .”

“But if we do it right, there’s not a lot a defense can do to stop it, even if they know it’s coming, especially if we—”

“Boys,” the man at the next dryer said, “do you know that you’re making no sense? I mean, I watch basketball, and I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Kent and William grinned at him. At the end of their shift, they went upstairs to the gym, where it was twenty degrees cooler, and shot baskets.

Kent was from Detroit, had loud opinions on all the NBA players and teams, and often broke his sentences in half to laugh at one of the dumb jokes that flew like paper airplanes around the locker room. During practices, he was repeatedly yelled at by the coach for show-boating, which Kent apologized for but was unable to stop himself from doing again five minutes later. “Fundamentals!” the coach thundered, over and over.

Kent claimed to be related to Magic Johnson, who was a senior at Michigan State and was widely considered a lock as the first pick in the upcoming NBA draft. It was so easy for Kent to make friends—everyone liked him—that William wondered why Kent chose to spend his time with him. All he could see was that Kent seemed to delight in William’s quietness as an opportunity to manage their friendship. Kent did most of the talking, and only slowly did William realize that Kent told personal stories in order to get William to share his own. After hearing about Kent’s grandmother’s leukemia, which had stunned everyone in the family—apparently, she’d claimed she

would live forever and was such a powerful force that they'd all believed her—William told Kent that he'd exchanged only one letter with his parents so far and that he was going to stay at school for Christmas break.

After a long night practice, while they were walking slowly across the quiet quad, their muscles cramping with exhaustion, Kent said, "Sometimes I have to remind myself that it doesn't matter if the coach benches me or bawls me out because he doesn't appreciate my beautiful game. I'm going to med school. He can't stop my future from happening."

William was surprised. "You're going to be a doctor?"

"Hundred percent. I don't have the tuition worked out yet, but I will. What're you going to do after college?"

William was aware of his cold fingers. It was early November, and when he breathed in, the air felt icy in his lungs. William never considered life after college; he was aware that he kept his eyes averted from the future on purpose. He wanted to say *basketball*, but he wasn't good enough for that to be his career. Kent asking the question confirmed that he didn't think William was good enough either.

"I don't know," William said.

"We'll start thinking about it, then," Kent said. "You got talents. We got time."

*Do I have talents?* William thought. He wasn't aware of any, off the basketball court.

Julia attended a Friday-night basketball game in early December, and when William noticed her in the stands, his eyesight blurred and he passed the ball to the other team. "Hey," Kent yelled as he powered by William on the court. "What kind of bullshit was that?" On the defensive end, William made two steals that turned the momentum of the game in favor of the Wildcats. On offense, at the top of the key, he made a bounce pass to an open shooter in the corner. Kent crowed just before halftime: "I get it! You got a girl here! Where is she?"

After the game—the Wildcats won, and William had played his best minutes of the early season—he climbed into the bleachers to see Julia. Only when he got closer did he see that she was seated with

three girls who resembled her. They all had the same boisterous shoulder-length curls. “These are my sisters,” Julia said. “I brought them to scout you. That’s basketball language, right?”

William nodded, and—under the scrutiny of the four girls—he was suddenly very aware of how short his basketball shorts were and of the flimsiness of his sleeveless jersey.

“We enjoyed it,” one of the younger-looking girls said. “It looked exhausting, though. I don’t think I’ve ever sweated in my entire life as much as you did. I’m Cecelia, and this is my twin, Emeline. We’re fourteen.”

Emeline and Cecelia pointed friendly smiles at him, and he smiled back. Julia and the sister on her other side were studying him like jewelry appraisers sizing up a stone. If one of them had pulled a watchmaker’s loupe out of her purse and held it to her eye, he wouldn’t have been surprised. Julia said, “You looked so powerful . . . out there on the court.”

William blushed, and the tops of Julia’s cheeks pinkened too. He could see this beautiful girl’s desire for him, and he couldn’t believe his luck. No one had ever wanted him before. He wished he could take her in his arms, in front of her sisters, in front of the entire arena, but that kind of bold action wasn’t in William’s nature. He was drenched with sweat, and Julia was speaking again.

“This is my sister Sylvie,” she said. “I’m the oldest, but only by ten months.”

“Nice to meet you,” Sylvie said. Her hair was a shade darker than Julia’s, and she was more petite, less curvy. She continued to study William, while Julia beamed like a peacock with all her feathers on display. While he stood there, he watched one of the buttons on Julia’s shirt come undone, pulled too tight across her generous chest. He had a glimpse of her pink bra before she realized and pulled everything back into place.

“How many siblings do you have?” Either Emeline or Cecelia asked this. They weren’t identical, but they looked very alike to William. Same olive complexion, same light brown hair.

“Siblings? None,” he said, though of course he thought of the framed photo of the redheaded toddler in his parents’ living room.

Julia already knew he was an only child—it had been one of her first questions during their first phone call—but the other three girls looked comically shocked.

“That’s terrible,” Emeline or Cecelia said.

“We should invite him to our house for dinner,” Sylvie said, and the other girls nodded. “He looks lonely.”

And so, four months into college, William found himself with his first girlfriend, and a new family.

# *Julia*

DECEMBER 1978—JULY 1981

JULIA WAS IN THE BACK GARDEN, AN EIGHTEEN-BY-SIXTEEN-FOOT rectangle hemmed by wooden fences, watching her mother dig up the last of the season's potatoes at the exact time William was due at the house. She knew he'd be punctual and that one of her sisters would let him in. William would probably be flustered by her father, who would ask him if he knew any poetry by heart, and by Emeline and Cecelia, who wouldn't cease moving or talking. Sylvie was working at the library, so he'd be spared her inquisitive stare. A few minutes alone with her sisters and father would help William to get to know them—Julia wanted him to see how lovable they were—and, as a bonus, he'd be extra-thrilled to see *her* when she walked inside. Julia was famous within her family for making an entrance, which really just meant that she thought about timing, whereas no one else in her family did. As a young child, Julia would twirl into the kitchen or living room, calling out, *Ta-da!*

What would William think of their small house, squeezed in next to identical squat brick houses on 18th Place? The Padavanos lived in Pilsen, a working-class neighborhood filled with immigrants. Colorful murals adorned the sides of buildings, and in the local supermarket, you were as likely to hear Spanish or Polish as English. Julia worried that William would find both the neighborhood and the in-

side of her family's home shabby. The floral couch covered in plastic. The wooden crucifix on the wall. The framed array of female saints next to the dinner table. When Julia's mother was frustrated, she named them aloud, her eyes fixed on the women's faces as if imploring them to save her from this family. *Adelaide, Agnes of Rome, Catherine of Siena, Clare of Assisi, Brigid of Ireland, Mary Magdalene, Philomena, Teresa of Avila, Maria Goretti*. All four Padavano girls could recite these names better than the rosary. It was unusual for a family dinner to conclude without either their father reciting poetry or their mother reciting her saints.

Julia shivered. She wasn't wearing a coat; it was forty degrees out, and most Chicagoans refused to consider it cold until the temperature dropped below freezing. "I like him," she said to her mother's back.

"Is he a drunk?"

"No. He's a basketball player. And an honors student. He's going to major in history."

"Is he as smart as you?"

Julia considered this. William was clearly smart. His brain worked. He asked questions that let her know he was interested in understanding her. His intelligence didn't register in the form of strong opinions, though. He was interested in questions and uncertain in his answers; he was moldable. William had studied with Julia a few times at the Lozano Library, which was only a few blocks away from the Padavanos' home. Sylvie worked at the library, and everyone in their neighborhood used it as a meeting place, but studying there meant that William had to commute an hour back to his dorm late at night. When making weekend plans, he always said, "Let's do whatever you want to do. You have the best ideas."

Julia had never considered the idea of physical intelligence until she'd attended William's recent basketball game. She was surprised by how exciting she found watching William compete with his team. She'd seen a more forceful side of him than he exhibited off the court: yelling commands to his teammates, using his strong, tall body to block an opponent from the basket. Julia had no interest in sports and



didn't understand the rules, but her handsome boyfriend had sprinted and leapt and spun with such pure physicality, and such intensity of focus, that she had found herself thinking: *yes*.

"He's a serious person," Julia said. "He takes life seriously, like I do."

Rose climbed to her feet. A stranger might have laughed at the sight of her, but Julia was accustomed to her mother's getup. When she gardened, Rose wore a modified baseball catcher's uniform, topped off with a navy-blue sombrero. She'd found all of it on the street. Their end of the block was 100 percent Italian, but many of the streets in the neighborhood were filled with Mexican families, and Rose had plucked the hat out of someone's garbage can after a Cinco de Mayo celebration. The catcher's equipment she'd picked up when Frank Ceccione, two doors down, got into drugs and quit his high school baseball team. Rose wore his huge leg guards and had sewed large pockets for her gardening tools onto the chest protector. She looked ready for some kind of game—it was just unclear which one.

"So, he's not smarter than you." Rose lifted the sombrero up and pushed her hand through her hair—wavy like her daughters' but laced with gray. She wasn't nearly as old as she looked, but starting years earlier Rose had forbidden any celebration of her birthday, a personal declaration of war against the passage of time. Julia's mother trained her eyes on the dirt rows of her garden. Potatoes and onions were all that remained to be harvested; most of Rose's work now was devoted to preparing the garden for winter. The only sections of non-growing soil were reserved for a narrow path between the plants and a white sculpture of the Virgin Mary, which leaned against the back-left corner of the fence. Rose sighed. "It's just as well, I suppose. I'm smarter than your father by a million miles."

Julia could see how "smart" was a tricky term—how did you quantify it, especially when neither of her parents had gone to college?—but her mother was correct. Julia had seen photos of Rose, pretty and tidy and smiling in this same garden, with Charlie at the beginning of their marriage, but her mother had eventually accepted and donned marital disappointment the same way she strapped on her ridiculous gardening outfit. All of her considerable efforts to propel her husband

toward some kind of financial stability and success had died in their tracks. Now the house was Charlie's space, and Rose's refuge was the garden.

The sky was dimming, and the air growing colder. When freezing temperatures arrived to stay, this neighborhood would quiet, but tonight it chattered as if trying to get in its final words: Distant kids shouted laughter; the older Mrs. Ceccione warbled in her garden; a motorcycle coughed three times before starting up. "I suppose it's time to go inside," Rose said. "Are you embarrassed by your old lady looking like this?"

"No," Julia said. She knew William's attention would be on her. She loved the hopeful look William directed at her, as if he were a ship eyeing the ideal harbor. William had grown up in a nice home, with a professional father, a big lawn, and his own bedroom. He clearly knew what success and security looked like, and the fact that he saw those possibilities in Julia pleased her immensely.

Rose had tried to build a solid life, but Charlie had wandered away with, or kicked over, every stone she laid down. Julia had decided, halfway through her first conversation with William, that he was the man for her. He had everything she was looking for, and as she'd told her mother, she just really liked him. The sight of him made her smile, and she loved fitting her small hand inside his large one. They made an excellent team: William had experienced the kind of life Julia wanted, so he could direct her endless energy while they built their future together. Once she and William were married and established in their own home, she would help her family. Her solid foundation would extend to become theirs.

She almost laughed out loud at the relief on her boyfriend's face when she entered the living room. William was seated next to her father on the squeaky couch, and Charlie had his hand on the young man's shoulder. Cecelia was lying across the old red armchair, and Emeline was staring in the mirror hung beside the front door, adjusting her hair.

Cecelia was saying, in a serious voice, "You have an excellent nose, William."

"Oh," William said, clearly surprised. "Thank you?"

Julia grinned. “Don’t mind Cecelia. She talks that way because she’s an artist.” Cecelia had special access to the art room at the high school, and she considered everything in her sightline to be source material for future paintings. The last time Julia—intrigued by the focused expression on Cecelia’s face—asked her sister what she was thinking about, Cecelia had said, “Purple.”

“You *do* have a nice nose,” Emeline said politely, because she’d noticed William blush and wanted to make him feel better. Emeline read the emotional tenor of every room and wanted everyone to feel comfortable and content at all times.

“He doesn’t know a word of Whitman,” Charlie said to Julia. “Can you imagine? William didn’t get here a moment too soon. I gave him a few lines to tide him over.”

“No one knows Whitman except for you, Daddy,” Cecelia said.

The fact that William didn’t know any of Walt Whitman’s poems was additional validation for Julia that her boyfriend was different from her father. She could tell from Charlie’s voice that he’d been drinking but wasn’t yet drunk. He had a glass in his hand, half filled with melting ice cubes.

“I can reserve *Leaves of Grass* for you at the library, if you’d like,” Sylvie said to William. “It’s worth reading.”

Julia hadn’t noticed Sylvie, who stood in the doorway of the kitchen. She must have just gotten home from her shift at the library, and her lips were the kind of deep red that meant she’d been kissing one of her boys in the stacks. Sylvie was a senior in high school and spent her free hours working as many shifts as possible to save money for community college. She wouldn’t earn an academic scholarship like Julia had, because she hadn’t matched her older sister’s determination to get one. Sylvie aced the classes she was interested in but got C’s or D’s in everything else. Julia had operated her determination like a lawn mower and mowed through high school with the next step in her sights.

“Thank you,” William said. “I’m afraid I haven’t read much poetry at all.”

### Copyrighted Material

Julia was sure William hadn’t noticed her sister’s lips, and even if he had, he wouldn’t know what they meant. Sylvie was the sister Julia

was closest to, and she was also the only person who stymied Julia, who left her at a loss for words. Her sister had read hundreds of novels—it had been Sylvie’s only interest, and hobby, for their entire lives—and out of those books she’d plucked a life goal: to have a great, once-in-a-century love affair. It was a child’s dream, but Sylvie was still holding on to it with both hands. She was looking for *him*—her soulmate—every day of her life. And she made out with boys during her shifts in the library to practice for when she met him.

“It’s not right to practice like that,” Julia would tell Sylvie, when they were lying side by side in their dark bedroom at night. “And the kind of love you’re looking for is made up, anyway. The idea of love in those books—*Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Anna Karenina*—is that it’s a force that obliterates you. They’re all tragedies, Sylvie. Think about it; those novels all end with despair, or death.”

Sylvie had sighed. “The tragedy isn’t the point,” she said. “We read those books today because the romance is so enormous and true that we can’t look away. It’s not obliteration; it’s a kind of expanding, I think. If I’m lucky enough to know love like that . . .” She went quiet, unable to put into words how meaningful this would be.

Julia shook her head at the sight of her sister’s red lips, because this dream was bound to backfire. Sylvie cared too much and lived too much in her head. She would be branded a slut and eventually marry a good-looking loser because he stared at Sylvie in a way that reminded her of Heathcliff.

Emeline was talking about her homeroom teacher, who was on probation for smoking marijuana. “He’s so honest,” she said. “He told us how he got caught and everything. I’m worried he’s going to get in more trouble for telling us about it. He doesn’t seem to understand the grown-up rules for what to say and what to keep to himself. I kept wanting to tell him to shush.”

“You should also tell him not to smoke pot,” Cecelia said.

“I suppose we should eat?” Rose had come out of her bedroom, clean and wearing one of her nicer housedresses. “It’s lovely to meet you, William. Do you like red wine?”

He stood, unfolding his long body from the low couch. He nodded. “Hello, ma’am.”

“Sweet mother of Mary.” Rose tipped her head back to look up at him. She was barely five feet tall. “You didn’t think to mention that he’s a giant, Julia?”

“He’s a marvel, though, isn’t he?” Charlie said. “He’s got our Julia soft around the edges, which I wouldn’t have thought possible. Look at her smile.”

“Daddy,” Julia said.

“What position do you play?” Charlie asked William.

“Small forward.”

“Ha! If you’re the small forward, I’d hate to meet the big one.”

“I wonder what the evolutionary explanation is for that kind of height,” Sylvie said. “Did we need people who could peer over walls to see if the enemy was coming?”

Everyone in the room, including William, laughed, and Julia thought he looked a little teary in the middle of the action. She made her way to him and whispered, “Are we too much for you?”

He squeezed her hand, a gesture she understood meant both yes and no.

Dinner wasn’t delicious. Despite the fact that she grew beautiful vegetables, Rose hated to cook, so they took turns battling dinner onto the table. The vegetables weren’t intended for them, anyway—they were sold by the twins each weekend at a farmers’ market in a nearby wealthy neighborhood. It was Emeline’s turn to cook, which meant they had frozen TV dinners. The guest got to choose his TV dinner first; William selected turkey, which came on a tray with small compartments for mashed potatoes, peas, and cranberry sauce. The family members chose carelessly after him and started eating. Emeline had also made Pillsbury crescent rolls, popped out of the tube and baked in the oven. Those elicited more enthusiasm and were gone in ten minutes.

“My mother made this same brand of dinner when I was growing up,” William said. “It’s nice to have it again. Thank you.”

“I’m glad you’re not appalled by our entertaining,” Rose said. “I’d like to know if you were raised Catholic.”

“I went to Catholic school in Boston all the way through.”

“Will you go into your pop’s line of work?” Charlie asked.

This question surprised Julia, and she could see that it startled her sisters too. Charlie never mentioned work, never asked anyone about their job. He hated his job at the paper plant. The only reason he wasn't fired—according to Rose—was that the man who owned the company was his childhood friend. Charlie regularly told his daughters that a job did not make a person.

"What makes you, Daddy?" Emeline had asked a few years earlier in response to this comment. She'd spoken with all of her little-girl sweetness; it was commonly agreed that she was the gentlest and most earnest of the four girls. "Your smile," Charlie had said. "The night sky. The flowering dogwood in front of Mrs. Ceccione's house."

Julia had listened and thought: *That's all nonsense. And useless to Mom, who's doing strangers' laundry every week to pay the bills.*

Perhaps Charlie was trying to ask the kind of question he believed other fathers asked their daughters' boyfriends. After the words left his mouth, he finished his drink and reached for the wine bottle.

"Daddy looked frightened," Sylvie would note to Julia later that night, in the dark. "And did you hear Mom use the word *appalled*? She never talks like that. They were both showing off for William."

"No, sir," William said. "My father is in accounting. I—" He hesitated, and Julia thought, *This is difficult for him because he doesn't have the answer. He lacks answers.* A shiver of pleasure climbed her spine. Julia specialized in answers. From the time she was old enough to speak, she'd bossed her sisters around, pointing out their problems and providing solutions. Sometimes her sisters found this irritating, but they would also admit that having a "master troubleshooter" in their own home was an asset. One by one, they would seek her out and say sheepishly, *Julia, I have a problem.* It would be about a mean boy, or a strict teacher, or a lost borrowed necklace. And Julia would thrill at their request, rub her hands together, and figure out what to do.

William said, "If basketball doesn't work out, I might . . ." His voice stopped, and he looked as lost as Charlie had a moment earlier, suspended in time, as if his only hope was that the end of the sentence might magically appear.

Julia said, "He might become a professor."

"Ooh," Emeline said approvingly. "There's a nice-looking profes-

sor two blocks over, and the ladies follow him around. He wears excellent jackets.”

“Professor of what?” Sylvie said.

“No idea,” Emeline said. “Doesn’t matter, does it?”

“Of course it matters.”

“A *professor*,” Charlie said, as if Julia had said *astronaut* or *president of the United States*. Rose talked about college all the time, but her education had ended after high school, and Charlie had dropped out of college after Julia was born. “That would be something.”

William shot Julia a look, part thanks, part something else, and the patter at the table continued around them.

Later that night, when they went for a walk around the neighborhood, William said, “What was that about me being a professor?”

Julia felt her cheeks flush. She said, “I wanted to help, and Kent told me you were writing a book about the history of basketball.”

William let go of her hand, without seeming to notice. “He did? It’s not a book—it’s more notes at this point. I don’t know if it will ever be a book. I don’t know what it will be.”

“It’s impressive,” she said. “I don’t know any other college kids who are writing a book in their free time. It’s very ambitious. Sounds like a future professor to me.”

He shrugged, but she could see him considering the idea.

William was tall and shadowy above her. A man, but young. Pilsen was muted tonight under a navy-blue sky. They were on a smaller side street. She could see the spire of St. Procopius, where her family attended Sunday mass, a few blocks to the right. Julia thought of Sylvie being kissed against a row of science-fiction novels under the bright lights of the library. She reached over and tugged on the front of William’s coat. *Come down here.*

He knew this signal and lowered his head. His lips met hers—gentle, warm—and they pressed together in the middle of the street, in the middle of their romance, in the middle of her neighborhood. Julia loved kissing William. She’d kissed a couple of boys before him, but those boys had approached kissing like it was the starting pistol in a sprint. Presumably, the finish line was sex, but neither of the boys had expected to get that far; they were simply trying to cover as much

ground as possible before Julia called off the race. A cheek kiss veered into kissing on the lips, which escalated rapidly to French kissing, and then the boy was patting her breast as if trying to get a feel for its measurements. Julia had never let anyone go further than that point, but the whole endeavor was so stressful that she'd only been able to experience kisses as wet and reckless. William, though, was different. His kisses were slow and not part of a race, which allowed Julia to relax. Because she felt safe, different parts of her body lit up, and she pressed her soft body against his. With William, she wanted more for the first time. She wanted him.

When they finally pulled apart, she whispered into his chest, "I'm going to leave this place."

"Where? Your parents' house?"

"Yes, and this whole neighborhood. After college. When"—it was Julia's turn to hesitate—"when my real life starts. Nothing starts here; you saw my family. People get stuck here." She pictured the soil in Rose's garden: rich, pebbly, sticky to the touch. She rubbed her hand against William's jacket, as if to wipe off the dirt. "There are much nicer neighborhoods in Chicago. They're a different world from here. I wonder if you'll want to go back to Boston?"

"I like it here," he said. "I like your family."

Julia realized she'd been holding her breath, waiting for his response. She'd decided William was her future, but she wasn't sure he felt the same way, though she suspected he did. "I like them too," she said. "I just don't want to *be* them."

When Julia crept back into the house later that night and into the tiny bedroom she shared with Sylvie, she found all her sisters waiting there in their nightgowns. They offered her triumphant smiles.

"What?" she whispered, unable not to smile in return.

"You're in love!" Emeline whispered, and the girls pulled Julia onto her bed, a celebration of the first of them to take this step, the first of them to hand her heart to a boy. The twins and Sylvie collapsed onto the single bed with her. They'd done this countless times; it had gotten trickier as their bodies grew, but they knew how to tuck their limbs and arrange themselves to make it work.

Julia laughed with her hand over her mouth, careful not to make



noise and wake up their parents. She was surprised to find tears in her eyes, wrapped up in her sisters' arms. "I might be," she said.

"We approve," Sylvie said. "He looks at you like you're the bee's knees, which you are."

"I like the color of his eyes," Cecelia said. "They're an unusual shade of blue. I'm going to paint them."

"It's not your kind of love, Sylvie," Julia said, wanting to make that clear. "It's a sensible kind."

"Of course," Sylvie said, and kissed her on the cheek. "You're a sensible person. And we're so happy for you."

WILLIAM PROPOSED WHEN THEY were juniors. This had been the plan, Julia's plan. They would marry right after graduation. She'd shifted her major from humanities to economics, after taking a fascinating organizational-psychology course. She learned about systems, how every business was made up of a collection of intricate parts, motivations, and movements. How if one part was broken or out of step, it could doom the entire company. Her professor was a business consultant who advised companies on how to make their workflow more "efficient" and "effective." Julia worked for Professor Cooper during the summer between her junior and senior years, taking notes and drawing business-operations charts on architectural paper. Her family made fun of her navy pumps and skirt suit, but she loved walking into the air-conditioned chill of office buildings, loved how everyone dressed like they took themselves and their work seriously, even loved walking through clouds of cigarette smoke on her way to the ladies' room. The men looked how she thought men should look, and she bought William a crisp white button-down shirt for his birthday that year. She planned to add a corduroy blazer at Christmas. William had decided to make Julia's suggestion that he become a history professor a reality. Julia appreciated the elegance of her plans: engaged this summer, graduation and wedding next summer, and then William would enter a PhD program. Julia loved living in this moment, with her life directly in front of her instead of off in the distance. She'd spent her

entire childhood waiting to grow up so she could be *here*, ringing all the bells of adulthood.

William was spending his last full summer at Northwestern in basketball training camp, and Julia would often meet him at the athletic center at the end of the day so they could have dinner together. She ran into Kent on the quad occasionally, when he left practice early for his summer job at the college infirmary. Julia liked Kent, but she always felt slightly uncomfortable around him. It seemed like their timing was off, to the extent that they often spoke at the same moment. When they were with William and he said something, they both responded and ran over each other's words. Julia respected Kent—after all, he was planning to put himself through medical school—and thought he was a good influence on William. Part of her discomfort was a desire for Kent to like her. She wasn't sure that he did. In his presence, she flipped through possible conversations in her head, looking for one that would put them on solid ground.

"Good evening, General," Kent said, when he saw her that evening. "I hear you're burning it up in the corporate world."

"Don't call me that," she said, but she smiled. It was unthinkable to take anything Kent said as an insult; his tone and ready smile didn't allow for that possibility. "How's basketball?"

"Joyful," he said, and the way he said the word reminded Julia of when Cecelia had answered a question with an excited *purple*.

"Our boy was feeling himself at practice today," Kent said. "He's having fun this summer. It's good to see."

This had a note of chiding to Julia's ear, but she couldn't see what Kent would be chiding her about. Did he think she didn't want William to have fun?

When Kent said goodbye, she sat down on a bench to wait. She shook her head, annoyed at how she allowed William's friend to fluster her. She pulled a compact out of her purse and reapplied her lipstick, then stood up when she spotted her handsome fiancé leaving the gym in the middle of a flock of tall, gangly young men. She'd run into an acquaintance from her freshman biology class on the street recently, and the girl had said, *I heard you were engaged to that tall boy with the*

*beautiful eyes. He's very cute.* Julia held tight to William's hand while they walked to a café for dinner.

William was slow-moving and unable to hold a conversation until he'd eaten a thousand calories and the color returned to his face. Julia, on the other hand, was rattling with excitement, unable to stop talking about every moment of her day.

"Professor Cooper says I'm a natural problem-solver," she said.

"He's right." William cut his baked potato into a grid and then ate a square.

"I was wondering, have you been working on your writing?" She'd learned not to call it a book. "You could use it as your senior thesis."

"It's a mess," he said. "I haven't had much time for it lately, and I can't figure out how to focus the material."

"I'd love to read it."

He shook his head.

She wanted to ask, *Has Kent read it?* But she didn't want to hear William say yes. She wanted to read the book because she was interested and so she could have a sense of how good it was. Whether it had the potential to build a career around.

"I'm going to start this year," he said. "Coach said my playing has taken a leap."

"Start?"

"Start every game. I'll be part of the best five. When NBA scouts come, they'll see me play."

"That's fun," she said. "I'll cheer for you."

He smiled. "Thank you."

"Have you told your parents about our engagement yet?"

He shook his head. "I haven't. I should, I know. But"—he hesitated—"I don't think they'll be interested."

Julia gave a smile she knew was too tight. He'd been avoiding telling his parents for weeks. She believed it was because he was embarrassed to tell them that he'd asked an Italian American girl from a poor family to marry him. He'd told her enough about his upbringing that she knew his father had an impressive job and his mother didn't need to work. They probably had airs and expectations for their only child, but William wouldn't admit this, and she wouldn't state her fear

outright. Now she said, in a tight voice to match her tight smile, “Don’t be ridiculous. They’re your parents.”

“Listen,” he said, “I know it would be strange *not* to invite them to the wedding, but I don’t think we need to invite them.” He saw her face and said, “I’m just being honest. I know it’s unusual.”

“You’ll call them tonight,” she said. “And I’ll be on the phone with you. I’m charming. They’ll adore me.”

William was quiet for a moment, and his eyelids drooped in a way that indicated he had gone far away from her. When he looked up, he regarded her as if she were a problem he needed to solve.

“You love me,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, and the word seemed to settle something inside him. “Okay, let’s do it.”

An hour later, sharing the hard wooden stool in the old-fashioned phone booth in his dorm hallway, they called Boston. William’s mother answered the call, and William said hello. The woman sounded surprised to hear from him, though she was polite. Then Julia spoke—her voice sounding overamplified to her own ears, as if she were speaking through a megaphone—and William’s mother sounded far away. She said she had something in the oven and it was nice they were getting married, but she had to go now.

The entire call was finished in less than ten minutes.

Julia gulped for air when she hung up the receiver, winded from trying to reach, to touch, the distant woman on the end of the line.

When she could speak, she said, “You were right. She doesn’t want to come.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I know that’s disappointing to you. Your vision of the wedding had everyone there.”

Julia was pressed against William on the tiny seat. The hallway booth was warm. The temperature and the disappointment and Julia’s sympathy for this boy rose inside her—this boy who deserved parents who kissed his cheek the way her parents kissed hers. They had planned not to have sex until they were married, though they had come close to breaking that resolution once or twice. The remote woman on the phone had handed William off to Julia in a way that felt as significant as a wedding vow. She needed to take care of him; she

needed to love him, with every part of her. In fact, she had to, right now. She was flushed, her skirt was twisted around her waist because of the seating arrangement, and she needed to be closer to him in order for anything to be all right.

She said, "Can we have privacy in your room?"

His roommate was gone for the summer. William nodded, a question on his face.

She took his hand and led him down the hall, into his room, and locked the door behind them.

# Sylvie

AUGUST 1981—JUNE 1982

THE LOZANO LIBRARY OVERLOOKED A THREE-WAY INTERSECTION in the center of Pilsen. Sylvie loved every inch of the spacious library and the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that showed whatever light and weather the city had to offer. She loved how the library welcomed everyone and how the librarians dutifully answered every question presented to them, no matter how arcane or ridiculous. Sylvie had been working in the library since she was thirteen; she'd started by shelving books and now, at the age of twenty, she bore the title of librarian's assistant.

Sylvie was shelving copies of *What Color Is Your Parachute?* when Ernie, a boy her age with a dimple in his chin, smiled his way into her row. They had gone to high school together, and he sometimes stopped by after his morning session of electrician school. After checking that no one else was in sight, Sylvie stepped into his arms. They kissed for about ninety seconds, making two slow turns down the aisle with his hand on her lower back, and then she tapped him on the shoulder, and he was gone.

Sylvie told Julia she kissed boys to practice for her great love, and that was true. But she also did it because it was fun. She'd waited through her entire childhood, scanning classrooms for her person, her version of Gilbert Blythe from *Anne of Green Gables*. Sylvie hadn't found