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books



Photo by Ashley Poston

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THE  
SEVEN  
YEAR  
SLIP

ASHLEY POSTON



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

far-off places I'd never been. And in the evenings, the moon looked so close from her bedroom windows I could almost catch it.

The apartment was indeed magical. You couldn't convince me otherwise. I just thought it was my aunt who made it magical—the way she lived, wide and wild, that infected everything she touched.

"No, no," she said with a wave of her hand—the one holding a lit Marlboro cigarette. The smoke wafted out of the open window, ruffling the two pigeons cooing on the sill, and into the cloudless sky. "I don't mean *metaphorically*, my darling Clementine. You might not believe me at first, but I promise it's true."

Then she leaned closer, and her mischief turned into a smile that shone in her glittery brown eyes, and she told me a secret.

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## Publishers Lunch

**MY AUNT USED TO** say, if you don't fit in, fool everyone until you do.

She also said to keep your passport renewed, to pair red wines with meats and whites with everything else, to find work that is fulfilling to your heart as well as your head, to never forget to fall in love whenever you can find it because love is nothing if not a matter of timing, and to chase the moon.

Always, *always* chase the moon.

It must have worked for her, because it never mattered where she was in the world, she was home. She waltzed through life like she belonged at every party she was never invited to, fell in love with every lonely heart she found, and found luck in every adventure. She had that air about her—tourists asked her for directions when she went abroad, servers asked her opinion on wines and fine whiskeys, celebrities asked her about her life.

Once, when we were at the Tower of London, my aunt and I accidentally found ourselves at an exclusive party at the Chapel Royal of St. Peter ad Vincula and managed to *stay* with a well-placed

compliment and a knockoff statement necklace. There, we met a prince of Wales, or Norway or somewhere, moonlighting as the DJ. I didn't remember much of the rest of that night since I overestimated my tolerance for too-expensive scotch.

But every adventure with my aunt was like that. She was the master of belonging.

If you aren't sure which fork to use at a fancy dinner? Go along with the person beside you. Lost in a city you've lived in for most of your life? Pretend you're a tourist. Listening to an opera after never hearing one ever before? Nod and comment on the chilling vibrato. Sitting in a Michelin-starred restaurant drinking a bottle of red wine that costs more than your monthly apartment rent? Comment on the body and act like you've tasted better.

Which, in this case, I had.

The two-dollar bottle of wine from Trader Joe's tasted better than this, but the delicious small plates made up for it. Bacon-wrapped dates and fried goat cheese drizzled in lavender honey and smoked trout fritters that melted in your mouth. All the while sitting in a charming little restaurant with soft yellow lightning, the front windows open to let in the sounds of the city, vines of pothos plants and evergreen ferns hanging from the sconces above us, as central air brushed across our shoulders. The walls were trimmed in mahogany, the booths a supple leather that, in this early June heat, would peel the skin off my thighs if I wasn't careful. The place was intimate, the tables spaced just far enough apart that we couldn't hear the hushed conversations of anyone else in the restaurant over the constant soft murmur from the kitchen.

If a restaurant could romance, I was utterly enchanted.

Fiona, Drew, and I sat at a small table in the Olive Branch, a Michelin-starred restaurant down in SoHo Drew had been *begging* to go to for the last week. I'm not usually one for long lunches, but

it was a Friday in the summer, and to be fair, I owed Fiona, Drew's wife, a favor, since I'd had to bail on a play last week that Drew wanted to see. Drew Torres was an editor and hungry to find unique and talented authors, so she'd dragged both me and Fiona along to the weirdest concerts, plays, and places I'd ever been to. And that was saying a lot, because I'd been to forty-three countries with my aunt and she *excelled* at finding weird places.

This, however, was very—*very*—nice.

"This is officially the fanciest lunch I've ever been to," Fiona announced, popping another bacon-wrapped date into her mouth. It was the only thing we'd ordered so far that she could eat—the rare wagyu slices were out of the question for a person seven months pregnant. Fiona was tall and waifish, with dyed-periwinkle hair and pale white skin. She had dark freckles across her cheeks and always wore kitschy earrings she found at flea markets on the weekends. Today's flavor was metal snakes with signs in their mouths that read **FUCK OFF**. She was Strauss & Adder's best in-house designer.

Beside her sat Drew, spearing another wagyu slice. She was a newly minted senior editor at Strauss & Adder, with long curly black hair and warm brown skin. She always dressed like she was about to go on an excavation in Egypt in 1910—and today was no different: supple tan trousers and a pressed white button-down and suspenders.

Sitting with them, I felt a little underdressed in my free Eggeverything Café T-shirt from my parent's favorite diner, light-wash jeans, and red flats I'd had since college, duct tape on the soles because I couldn't bear to part with them. I was going on three days without washing my hair, and the dry shampoo only did so much, but I'd been late to work this morning, so I hadn't thought a lot about it. I was a senior publicist at Strauss & Adder, a perpetual

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planner, and somehow I had not planned for this outing in the slightest. To be fair, it *was* a Summer Friday, and I hadn't expected anyone to be in the office today.

"It *is* really fancy in here," I agreed. "It's much better than that poetry reading in the Village."

Fiona nodded. "Though I did enjoy how all of their drinks were named after dead poets."

I made a face. "The Emily Dickinson gave me the *worst* hang-over."

Drew looked incredibly proud of herself. "Isn't this place just so nice? You know that article I sent you? The one in *Eater*? The author, James Ashton, is the head chef here. The article is a few years old, but it's still a great read."

"And you want him to do a book with us?" Fiona asked. "For—what—a cookbook?"

Drew seemed genuinely hurt. "What do you take me for, a plebeian? Absolutely not. A cookbook would be wasted on someone who is such a wizard with words."

Fiona and I gave each other a knowing look. Drew had said the same about the play I narrowly avoided last week as I moved into my late aunt's apartment on the Upper East Side. Fiona told me on Saturday, while I heaved a record player into the elevator, that she would never go swimming in the ocean again.

With that said, Drew did have a fantastic eye for what a person *could* write, not what they had already. She was brilliant at possibilities. She thrived on them.

That was what made her a unique sort of powerhouse. She always took in the underdogs, and she always helped them bloom.

"What's that look for?" Drew asked, looking pointedly between the two of us. "My instincts were right about that musician we saw on Governors Island last month."

"Sweetheart," Fiona replied patiently, "I'm still getting over the play I saw last week about a *man who had an affair with a dolphin*."

Drew winced. "That was . . . a mistake. But the musician wasn't! And neither was that TikTokker who wrote that amusement park thriller. It's going to be phenomenal. And this chef . . . I *know* this chef is special. I want to hear more about that summer he turned twenty-six—he alluded to it in *Eater*, but not enough."

"You think there's a story there?" Fiona asked.

"I'm sure there is. Right, Clementine?"

Then they looked at me expectantly.

"I . . . haven't read it, actually," I admitted, and Fiona *tsked* in that way of hers that will end up making their future child incredibly contrite. I ducked my head in embarrassment.

"Well, you should!" Drew replied. "He's been all around the world, just like you. The way he relates food to friendship and memories—I want him." She turned her hungry gaze toward the kitchen. "I want him so badly." And whenever she had that kind of look in her eyes, there was no stopping her.

I took another sip of too-dry wine and picked up the dessert menu to scan it. While we usually took lunches together—it was a perk of having best friends who all worked in the same building as you—we mostly stayed around Midtown, and the restaurants in Midtown were . . .

Well.

I'd eaten more sandwiches and lobster mac and cheeses from food trucks than I cared to admit. Midtown in the summer was tourist central, so trying to find a lunch spot anywhere that wasn't a food truck or the greens at Bryant Park was nearly impossible without a reservation.

"Well, when you get him, I have a question about this dessert

menu," I said, pointing to the first item there. "What the *hell* is a deconstructed lemon pie?"

"Ooh, that one is the chef's specialty," Drew informed us as Fiona snatched the menu from me to read about it. "I definitely want to try it."

"If it's just a slice of lemon sprinkled with some granular sugar on a graham cracker," Fiona said, "I'm going to laugh."

I checked my phone for the time. "Whatever it is, we should probably order it and head back. I told Rhonda I'd be back by one."

"It's Friday!" Fiona argued, waving the dessert menu at me. "No one works on Fridays in the summer. Especially not in publishing."

"Well, I do," I replied. Rhonda Adder was my boss, the director of marketing and publicity, and copublisher. She was one of the most successful women in the business. If there was a bestseller to be had in a book, she knew exactly how to squeeze it out, and that was a talent in and of itself. Speaking of talent, just so Fiona and Drew knew the situation, I added, "I have three authors on tour right now—and something is *bound* to go wrong."

Drew nodded in agreement. "Murphy's Law of Publishing."

"Murphy's Law," I echoed. "And Juliette cried herself sick this morning because of her boyfriend, so I'm trying to lighten her load today."

"Fuck Romeo-Rob," Drew intoned.

"Fuck Romeo-Rob," I agreed.

"Speaking of dating," Fiona sat up a little straighter, and put her elbows on the table. Oh, I knew that look, and I inwardly suppressed a groan. She leaned in to look at me, arching her eyebrows. "How're you and Nate doing?"

Suddenly, the wineglass looked very interesting, but the longer she stared at me waiting for an answer, the less resolve I had, until I finally sighed and said, "We broke up last week."

Fiona gasped like she'd been personally insulted. "Last *week*? Before or *after* you moved?"

"While I was moving. The night you all went to the play."

"And you didn't tell us?" Drew added, more curious than her distraught wife.

"You didn't tell us!" Fiona echoed in a cry. "That's *important!*"

"It really wasn't that big of a deal." I shrugged. "It was over text messages. I think he's already dating somebody he met on Hinge." My friends looked at me with utter pity, but I waved it off. "Really, it's fine. We weren't that compatible anyway."

Which was true, but I didn't include the fight we had before the texts. *Fight* was a strong word for it, though. It felt more like a shrug and a white flag tossed onto an already-abandoned battlefield.

"Again? You have to work late *again*?" he'd asked. "You know this is my big night. I want you here with me."

To be fair, I had forgotten that it was the opening night of a gallery with his work. He was an artist—a metalworker, actually—and this was a big thing for him. "I'm sorry, Nate. This is important."

And it was, I was sure of it, even though I couldn't remember what the emergency had been to make me stay late.

He was quiet for a long moment, and then he asked, "Is this how it's going to be? I don't want to be second to your job, Clementine."

"You're not!"

He was. He absolutely was. I kept him at arm's length because at least there he wouldn't be able to see how broken I was. I could keep lying. I could keep pretending I was fine—because I *was* fine. I had to be. I didn't like people worrying about me when they had so many other things to worry about. That was my allure, right?

That you didn't need to worry about Clementine West. She always figured it out.

Nate let out that heavy, body-heaving sigh. "Clementine, I think you need to be honest." And that was it—the nail in the proverbial coffin. "You're so closed off, you use work as a shield. I don't think I even really know you. You won't open up. You won't be *vulnerable*. Whatever happened to that girl in those photos? With watercolor under her fingernails?"

She was gone, but that much he already knew. He met me after she was already gone. I think that might have been why he didn't just dump me after I canceled plans on him the first time, because he kept trying to find that girl with watercolors under her fingernails that he saw once in a photo in my old apartment. The girl from before.

"Do you even love me?" he went on. "I can't remember you saying it once."

"We've only dated for three months. It's a little early, don't you think?"

"When you know, you know."

I pursed my lips. "Then I guess I don't know."

And that was it.

I was at the end of this relationship. Before I said anything I'd regret, I hung up the phone, then texted him that it was over. I'd mail his toothbrush back to him. God knows I wasn't going to take a trip to *Williamsburg* if I didn't have to.

"Besides," I added, grabbing the too-expensive bottle of wine to top off my glass, "I don't really think I want to be in a relationship right now. I want to concentrate on my career—I don't have time to mess with guys I might end up dumping in a text message three months later. The sex wasn't even that good." I took a large gulp of wine to wash down *that* horrid truth.

Drew watched me in awe, shaking her head. "Look at that, not even a tear."

"I've never seen her cry over any guy," Fiona said to her wife.

I tried to argue that no, I actually *had*, but then closed my mouth again because . . . she was right. I seldom cried, anyway, and over some guy? Absolutely not. Fiona always said it was because all my relationships had boiled down to calling them *some guy*—a person not even worthy of a name in my memory. "Because you've never been in love," she once said, and maybe that was true.

"When you know, you know," Nate had said.

I didn't even know what love was supposed to feel like.

Fiona waved her hand. "Well, *whatever* to him, then! He didn't deserve a financially stable girlfriend who is kicking ass at work *and* owns an apartment on the Upper East Side," she went on, and then that seemed to remind her of the *other* thing I really didn't want to talk about. "How is it? The apartment?"

*The* apartment. She and Drew had stopped calling it my aunt's apartment back in January, but I still couldn't kick the habit. I shrugged.

I could tell them the truth—that every time I walked through the door, I expected to see my aunt there in her wingback chair the color of robin's eggs, but the chair was gone.

So was its owner.

"It's great," I decided.

Fiona and Drew both gave each other the same glance, as if they didn't believe me. Fair enough; I wasn't a very good liar.

"It's *great*," I repeated. "And why are we talking about me? Let's find this famous chef of yours and woo him to the dark side." I reached over the table for the last date and ate it.

"Sure, sure, we just need to flag down our server . . ." Drew muttered, looking around to see if she could catch anyone's eye, but