



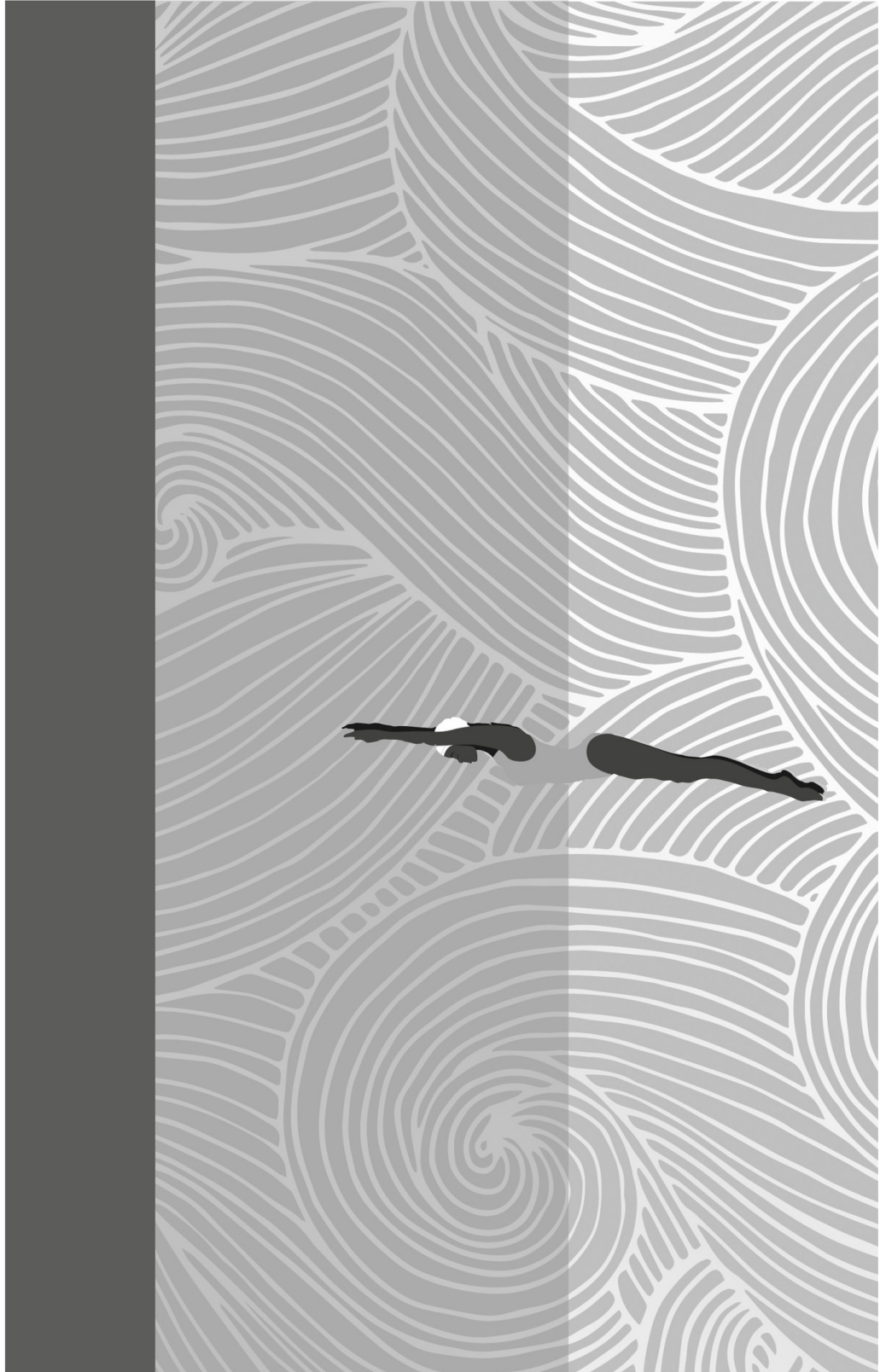
BLACK

CAKE

a novel

CHARMAINE

WILKERSON





BLACK CAKE

A
Novel

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CHARMAINE
WILKERSON



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NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

NAMES: Wilkerson, Charmaine, author.

TITLE: *Black cake: a novel* / Charmaine Wilkerson.

DESCRIPTION: New York: Ballantine Books, [2022] |

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2021026213 (print) | LCCN 2021026214 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593358337 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593358344 (ebook) SUBJECTS: LCSH: Brothers and sisters—Fiction. | Mothers—Death—Fiction. | Families—Fiction. | LCGFT: Novels.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC PS3623.I5456 B58 2022 (print) | LCC PS3623.I5456 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021026213>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021026214>

Ebook ISBN 9780593358344

[randomhousebooks.com](https://www.randomhousebooks.com)

Title-page and part-title art assembled from iStock images

Book design by Barbara M. Bachman, adapted for ebook

Cover design: Jaya Miceli

Cover images: Zapatosoldador/Shutterstock (waves); Arelix/Shutterstock (woman); ppart/Shutterstock (texture)

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Dedication

Acknowledgments

About the Author



PROLOGUE

∴

THEN

—
1965
—

HE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN IT would come to this. He should have known the day that *hak gwai* wife of his ran away from home. Should have known the day he saw his daughter swimming in the bay as a storm bore down on her. Should have known when his parents dragged him to this island and changed their names. He stood at the water's edge, now, watching the waves crash white against the rocks, waiting for his daughter's body to wash ashore.

A policeman beckoned to him. The policeman was a girl. He'd never seen one of those before. She was holding a fluff of white fabric, his daughter's wedding dress, smeared with black cake and lilac icing. She must have dropped the cake on herself as she jumped up from the table. He

remembered a clattering of plates, the splintering of glass on the tile floor, someone crying out. When he looked toward his daughter, she was gone and her satin-covered shoes lay strewn on the lawn outside like tiny capsized boats.



*PART
ONE*

∴

Now

—
2018
—

SHE'S HERE.

Byron hears the elevator doors peel open. His first instinct is to rush toward his sister and embrace her. But when Benny leans in to hug him, Byron pushes her away, then turns to knock on the door to the attorney's office. He feels Benny put a hand on his arm. He shakes it free. Benny stands there, her mouth open, but says nothing. And what right does she have to say *anything*? Byron hasn't seen Benny in eight years. And now, their ma is gone for good.

What does Benny expect? She took a family argument and turned it into a cold war. Never mind all that talk about societal rejection and discrimination and *whatnot*. It seems to Byron that whatever kind of

problem you have in this world, you can find someone to show you understanding. And times are changing. There's even been a study in the news recently about people like Benny.

People like Benny.

The study says it can be a lonely road for people like her. But she won't be getting any sympathy from Byron, no. Benedetta Bennett gave up that luxury years ago when she turned her back on her family, even though she claims it was the other way around. At least she showed up this time. Six years ago, Byron and his mother sat in the church across from his father's coffin up in L.A. County, waiting for Benny to arrive, but no Benny. Later, Byron thought he saw his sister skirting the burial grounds in the back of a car. She'd be there any minute, he thought. But, still, no Benny. Only a text from her later, saying *I'm sorry*. Then silence. For months at a time. Then years.

As each year went by, he was less certain that Benny had been there that day or that he'd ever had a sister to begin with.

That he'd ever had a chubby, squiggle-headed baby girl following him around the house.

That she'd ever cheered him on at the national meets.

That he'd ever heard her voice sailing across the auditorium as he closed his hand around his doctoral diploma.

That he'd ever *not* felt the way he does right now. Orphaned and pissed as hell.

Benny

HER MOTHER'S ATTORNEY OPENS THE door and Benny looks past him, half expecting to see her ma sitting in the room. But it's only Benny and Byron now, and Byron won't even look at her.

The lawyer is saying something about a message from their mother but Benny can't concentrate, she's still looking at Byron, at the bits of gray in his hair that didn't use to be there. What's with the pushing, anyway? The man is forty-five years old, not ten. In all these years, her big brother has never shoved her, never hit her, not even when she was little and tended to pounce and bite like a puppy.

Benny's first memory of Byron: They are sitting on the couch, she is settled under her brother's arm, and Byron is reciting adventure stories to her from a book. His feet can already touch the floor. Byron stops to fluff Benny's hair with his fingers, to pull on her earlobes, to pinch her nostrils shut, to tickle her until she is breathless with laughter, until she is dying of happiness.

The Message

THEIR MOTHER HAS LEFT THEM a message, the lawyer says. The lawyer's name is Mr. Mitch. He's talking to Byron and Benny as though he's known them all their lives, though Byron can only recall meeting him one other time, when his ma needed help getting around town after her accident last winter, the one his friend Cable insisted wasn't an accident. Byron walked his mother up to Mr. Mitch's office, then went back outside to wait for her in the car. He was sitting there watching some kids skateboard down the broad, buff-toned sidewalks between one high-end chain store and the next, when a police officer rapped on his side window.

This kind of thing had happened to Byron so often over the course of his adult life that sometimes he forgot to be nervous. But most times, whenever he was approached or pulled over by an officer, he slid down into that space between one heartbeat and the next where he could hear his blood crashing through his body, a waterfall carrying centuries of history with it, threatening to wipe out the ground on which he stood. His research, his books and social media following, the speaking engagements, the scholarship he wanted to fund, all of it, could be gone in a split second of misunderstanding.

Only later, after the officer had opened the trunk of his patrol car and come back with a copy of Byron's latest book (*Could he have an autograph?*), did it occur to Byron that a grown man of any color, sitting alone in a car watching pre-adolescents skateboard up and down the

sidewalk, could elicit a reasonable degree of suspicion. All right, he could see that, it wasn't always about him being a black man. Though, mostly, it was.

"Let me just warn you," Mr. Mitch is saying now. "About your mother. You need to be prepared."

Prepared?

Prepared for what? Their mother is already gone.

His ma.

He doesn't see how anything after that is going to make much of a difference.