

“Plumbs the depths of marriage, motherhood, and friendship with warmth and wit.”

—**Maria Semple**, author of *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*

GOOD COMPANY

A NOVEL BY THE
NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF
THE NEST



**CYNTHIA D'APRIX
SWEENEY**

GOOD COMPANY

A Novel

**CYNTHIA
D'APRIX
SWEENEY**



An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Dedication

As is everything, for Mike

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Twenty-Four

Twenty-Five

Twenty-Six
Twenty-Seven

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by Cynthia D'Aprix Sweeney

Copyright

About the Publisher

One

Flora wasn't looking for the ring when she found it. She was rooting around an old file cabinet in the garage, searching for a photograph from the summer Ruby was five, thirteen years ago. Long years? Short? Both, depending on how she thought about them. Flora had woken up thinking about the photo and she knew it had to be somewhere in the house. The photo had moved from the ugly brown refrigerator door in Greenwich Village to an even uglier brown refrigerator door in Los Angeles ("How do two people on opposite coasts whose houses we are eventually going to live in *both* choose brown refrigerators?" she'd asked Julian) until ugly refrigerator number two shuddered its last breath one August morning and they'd replaced it with a new one that was fancier and stainless steel and wouldn't hold a magnet. She'd moved the photo to a bulletin board in the small enclosed sun porch they called "the office," but the edges started to curl and so she'd put it in a drawer, safe from the ravages of time and the relentless attention of the California sun. She'd cleaned out all those drawers a couple of years ago, right after she got the part voicing Leona the saucy lioness on the animated show *Griffith* and they'd turned "the office" into "the studio," a place she could record her voice-over work at home when she wanted. Where had she put all the stuff from those drawers? She would never throw away a photograph, but especially not that one.

"Don't we already have a pile of presents for Ruby?" Julian asked, rummaging through his bedside table, trying to help but just creating more mess. Their daughter was graduating from high school that night and Flora wanted to slip the photo in a frame and give it to her. A sweet surprise.

"We can probably get rid of a lot of that stuff," Flora said, eyeing the piles of junk Julian was extracting from his drawer and moving to the bed: an assortment of reading glasses, outdated computer cords, empty aspirin bottles, a few battered scripts. He would ignore her suggestion. After twenty

years of marriage the lines had been drawn, the places where she was allowed to exert her desire for order and the places she learned to ignore.

“Hey! These will come in handy for Ruby.” Julian held up an impressive wad of euros, coiled and fastened with a rubber band. At the end of the month, Ruby was going to Spain with her boyfriend’s family, after which she would meet Flora and Julian in upstate New York at the house in Stoneham, the same house in the missing photo from so long ago.

“I wish we could retake the photo this summer,” Flora said. “If David and Margot were coming, we could.” Julian tossed the euros over to Flora’s side of the bed, pleased with himself. Three years ago, standing in front of the currency booth at Charles de Gaulle Airport, they’d argued about whether or not to exchange the euros back to dollars. She remembered exactly. It was ungodly hot in the terminal because of some kind of air-conditioning malfunction. The three of them were logy and irritable from indulgence—days of cheese and baguettes, foie gras nearly every night, the croissants, the chocolate, the wine. Fifteen-year-old Ruby had been in a mood. “I am *not* being ungrateful. All I said is that the Parisians are pretty *sniffy* for people who can’t even get air-conditioning right. What’s the big deal?”

Ruby had never done well in the heat from the time she was a baby. Her early years in Greenwich Village during the summer were a nightmare. Ruby begging to leave the playground, refusing to wear a hat, her fair cheeks flushed red, the stinging heat rash between her meaty toddler thighs.

“Next year can we *please* go to the beach in July? Somewhere with *air-conditioning*, somewhere I’m not sweating through my clothes by noon?” She lifted one arm and gestured angrily toward the sweat stain at her armpit. “This blouse is ruined, Mom. It’s brand-new and I won’t find this silhouette in Los Angeles and it’s *ruined*.”

“Okay, okay.” Julian had placed a placating hand on Ruby’s shoulder. “Let’s find something cold to drink.” He had winked at Flora then, a signal, reassuring her that they were on the same side. They both heard in that moment how much Ruby sounded like Margot. *Silhouette, sniffy*—not Ruby’s vernacular.

That Ruby loved—worshipped—Flora’s best friend was a good thing. And it was no surprise that Margot, who had no children, and Ruby, who was an only child, were thick as thieves. The *ruined* blouse had been a gift from Margot, bought at a small boutique in the Sixth, not a place Flora

would ever deign to shop. Too expensive. Too intimidating. She and Margot had had a testy exchange about it at dinner in a tiny bistro the previous night, where they'd probably been a little too drunk, a little too loud. Margot and her husband, David, had taken Ruby for the afternoon and then reappeared laden with shopping bags. Ruby was bright-eyed and high-spirited and not complaining about the heat for once.

"This is too much," Flora said as Ruby opened bag after bag displaying her haul—the very sheer pink blouse, a pair of white gladiator sandals that Flora thought horrendous, a black scarf from some high-end designer covered with tiny skulls, a suede fringed handbag. "Is this in style now?" Flora said, running her fingers through the brown suede. "Mom," Ruby said. "Obviously."

Everything was impressive. Everything was expensive. Flora was annoyed at Ruby for accepting so much while also realizing how stubborn Margot could be, wielding her generosity like a bludgeon: *Here! take this, take it, take!* Sometimes it was impossible to resist the force of her.

"It's nothing." Margot waved Flora off, tucking the shopping bags beneath their crowded table. "Everything was on sale." David shrugged, his affable, agreeable self: *what Margot wants*—

But Flora was already feeling sheepish about the apartment they were renting. As always when traveling with Margot and David, it was obvious those two were covering most of the costs; there was no way Flora and Julian's "half"—the very reasonable figure Margot quoted as their share—was 50 percent of the spectacular, sprawling flat blocks from the Jardin du Luxembourg. "Maybe she got it with 'miles,'" Julian joked, when they were unpacking, referencing Margot's insistence that she would take care of everyone's plane tickets because she had airline miles she needed to use.

That day in the airport in France, Flora didn't have the energy to argue with Julian over exchanging the currency they could have used for the cab fare from LAX to home or for takeout that night. She'd just wanted to keep the peace. Get home. Regain her daughter's attention, because if everyone was being honest the real reason Flora was testy over the clothing purchases was ten days of Ruby hanging on everything Margot said, mimicking her gestures, her intonation, even one night—jokingly but also kind of accurately?—calling her *mon autre mère*.

Flora went downstairs and poured herself a cup of coffee, adding some almond creamer that Ruby had convinced her to use instead of half-and-

half. (“Sorry, Mom, but at your age dairy is basically poison.”)

She looked out the living room window. It was early, the sun barely rising, turning the sky a watery Monet blue and backlighting the downtown skyline. Early June in Los Angeles. June gloom. A thick, low marine layer shrouded the houses down the hill, making the neighborhood look like the hidden village of a fairy tale.

Julian grabbed his backpack and car keys and kissed Flora good-bye. His last day of shooting before the summer hiatus. She still wasn’t used to the slightly longer hair, the massive sideburns he’d grown for his new job playing a cop in 1970s New York City. A good cop, of course; the cop who was furtively building a case against corruption and cover-ups. Julian was almost always cast as *good*, he had one of those faces. His show had just been renewed and for the first time in all their married lives, they both had desirable parts, season renewals, almost two months off without worrying what the rest of the year might bring in the way of work. Julian pulled Flora close and spoke into her ear, “Tony, Tony come around. Something’s lost that must be found.” The old prayer to St. Anthony that her mother used to recite at top volume whenever anything was lost, as if St. Anthony lived in the apartment upstairs and she could summon him to rush down and look for her reading glasses or a misplaced glove.

Julian was teasing her, and though she no longer prayed to St. Anthony or anyone anymore she did have her little superstitious rituals around lost things. One was to rub her thumb along the thin line of her mother’s wedding ring, the modest band of white gold that she’d worn on her right hand since her mother died. She did it now. A tiny comforting gesture.

Where could the photograph be hiding? Then a flash, an idea. When they’d built the recording space in her office, she had moved a bunch of folders and papers from the house to the garage, mostly into the large file cabinet they’d owned since she was pregnant with Ruby, one they’d found on Twenty-Third Street in Manhattan back when the area was littered with office supply stores and they were supposed to be shopping for furniture for the baby’s room.

“It’s perfect,” Julian had said, standing in front of the bright white metal file cabinet.

“For a nursery?”

“At least it’s white.”

Flora balked. They had a hand-me-down crib and changing table, and she wanted to buy something new for the tiny space that would be Ruby's nursery. She wanted a rocking chair or a bookshelf or a toy box; it didn't seem right to stick a filing cabinet in a corner of the baby's room, and this was back in the earliest of the aughts, before decorating a nursery became a reflection of the good taste and intellectual rigor of the entire family, before Danish ceiling pendants and murals of enchanted forests and curated bookshelves and those little square lamps that reflected the sun, the moon, and the stars on the wall all night.

But the file cabinet was needed and practical and, she had to admit, had been a smart purchase. A prominent piece of Ruby's "nursery," it was in constant use. Flora and Julian had moved the cabinet from the snug apartment in the West Village to their first rental house in Los Angeles, where it seemed to shrink once it was settled into a larger space. When they bought the house in Los Feliz, the stalwart cabinet was relegated to the garage nobody ever needed for a car because there was no snow and it had barely even rained the last few years.

The file cabinet had been a compromise of early marriage between Julian's near hoarder-like tendencies and Flora's love of purging. The "archives," Julian only half-jokingly called the contents of the cabinet. Half-joking because he'd confessed to her once that he began keeping and cataloging everything of his when he was a young boy because he thought he'd be famous one day. She hadn't been surprised by his confession; she'd indulged the same fantasy when she was young: that she'd grow up to be an actress and that meant, to her kid self, some degree of fame, but it had never occurred to her to actually plan for the eventual telling of her story.

Once, she'd mustered the confidence to say her dream out loud to her mother when they were at the sink doing dishes. Josephine had laughed. "Every little girl thinks she's going to be a star." Flora didn't believe her. It wasn't possible that *every* little girl thought she would—or even wanted to—be famous. Minnie Doolin with her perpetually runny nose and saggy knee socks? Rosemary Castello, who in fourth grade was scolded in front of the whole class by Sister Demetrius for stuffing her bra because she'd used colored Kleenex that showed right through the white school-uniform blouse? Flora didn't buy it.

That Josephine believed *Josephine* was going to be famous was not only understandable but accepted family folklore, the story Josephine told about

her younger self most often. The auditions, the casting agent who loved her and wanted her to fly to Los Angeles. “They wanted me to be the next Elizabeth Taylor.” Glossed over were the years where she continued—unsuccessfully—to audition for Broadway, for radio and television commercials. Marrying Flora’s father and the quick dissolution of that relationship. The apartment Flora grew up in was like a shrine to her mother’s brief theater career. Crossing the threshold of the small two-bedroom above a bakery in Bay Ridge, you’d never know that Josephine had worked as an actress for only four years and a hotel telephone operator for thirty-five.

“Okay, Miss Rich and Famous, try again with this.” Flora’s mother handed her the copper-bottomed spaghetti pot. “You need the special cleanser. Make it nice and shiny, so you can see your face.”

Remembering now, Flora wondered if that was a common story: little boys who wanted to be famous started carefully and precisely cataloging their lives—*the archives*—and little girls were encouraged to use a variety of cleaning solutions on one sauce pot.

* * *

FLORA HATED THE GARAGE, which had often been claimed by rats over the years; it was a place she tried to pretend didn’t even exist. She administered a little pep talk to herself about rodents and their nocturnal habits, mustered her courage, and headed out to the freestanding structure at the end of their driveway. She lifted the heavy door with both hands and paused, listening for any signs of life. When they’d first moved into the house, the entire yard was infested with rats. An older woman had lived in the house for decades and at the end had been too weak and ill to maintain the property. Before they bought it, Flora used to pass the house all the time on her morning walks. It looked like something from a Grimms’ fairy tale: vaguely Tudorish, lots of half-timbering, a big cobblestone chimney, and leaded windows. The modest house felt exactly right for the three of them, but it was the extravagant yard that Flora had fallen for. Two looming eucalyptus trees planted long before the house had been built flanked a small patio. At the edge of the lawn, the most beautiful copse of fruit trees she’d ever seen: fig, lemon, tangerine, grapefruit. It was like a Bible color plate of the Garden of Eden. The first time she saw it, it left her breathless. It still did.

She never stopped feeling like she'd stepped into someone else's life when she walked outside and smelled the bitter morning air perfumed with eucalyptus, saw the hummingbirds darting in and out of the flowing bougainvillea and the tiny yellow finches eating seeds from the wild rosemary.

And then there were the rats. The fruit was an abundant year-round supply of free food for all the neighborhood rodents. She and Julian had put up a fence, cleared ground cover, baited traps, plugged holes in the garage and house, and she hadn't seen the heart-quickenning blur of brown in years. Still, she worried. But all was quiet today.

She made her way back to the file cabinet and opened the top drawer. It was jam-packed with manila folders, all from Good Company's early years back in New York. This was a wormhole she couldn't afford today, but she couldn't resist the program right in front: *Jason and Medea*—the production that Julian and his partner Ben had staged around a defunct city pool in Williamsburg, a retelling of Euripides's *Medea* set in modern-day Brooklyn. The cover of the program was a drawing—the silhouette of a woman carrying a small child in a blood-soaked T-shirt, the blood the only color on the cover. She'd always hated the image, so cold and ruthless. The critics had loved the production—well, the indie critics, the ones from the *Voice* and *Time Out*. But nobody had bought tickets.

“The play is so sad,” Flora'd said to a disappointed Julian one night.

“Life is sad,” he'd snapped at her.

In the second drawer, theater and drama books: Stanislavski, Hagen, Adler, Meisner, Strasberg. Julian didn't pledge fidelity to any particular method; he was a drama atheist with all the certainty and scorn of atheists. He loathed idolatry. He believed actors should use whatever worked.

She moved on to the third drawer. All of Ruby's old school records and progress reports. The art projects Flora had saved. She used to have to clean out Ruby's backpack and toy box when she was asleep, making sure to bring the garbage outside to the curb that same night. If she didn't, Ruby was bound to open the trash bin and spot something of hers—a broken doll, a drawing, a graded spelling test—and be pierced with longing and indignation. “You're throwing out my *Valentines*?” she said one June morning when Flora had finally dug deep into her school bag, trying to return it to some kind of order. “And my valentine *candy*?” Nearing the

final days of the school year, the candy hearts were mostly dust, but Ruby acted like Flora was discarding rare books, fine chocolates.

Flora would apologize. “Oh, honey. I didn’t mean to. Good thing you looked.” But Ruby would be chilly to her for the rest of the day and protective of every single one of her possessions for weeks, not forgetting. “Where’s the paper umbrella they gave me at the restaurant?” “What happened to that yellow ball?” “What did you do with my party hat?” she’d ask Flora, sharp and accusing.

Finally, Flora pulled open the bottom drawer. She dragged an old stool over, a red metal one from Ikea that they’d bought for Ruby to stand on to reach the kitchen counter when she was three. It was paint spattered and scratched but still sturdy. She sat and started rifling through the papers. A jumble of envelopes, not a single one labeled. One held a bunch of faded receipts, one a stack of postcards from various art museums and churches, all meant to serve as inspiration for what exactly she couldn’t remember—sets, or costumes maybe.

Under the folders, a large manila envelope that Flora recognized. She pulled it out and saw her own handwriting on the outside: KEEP. Ah, she remembered! She had gathered a bunch of photos and placed them here for safekeeping. She opened the envelope and the one she wanted was right on top.

The photograph had been taken at Ben’s sprawling family property upstate during rehearsal for a summer production that was an off-shoot of Good Company’s work in Manhattan. Ben and Julian founded and ran Good Company together, but from its earliest days Ben was fixated on mounting an outdoor show up at Stoneham. He pitched the idea late one April night over many beers in Flora and Julian’s living room. A piece of classic theater, site-specific, staged for one night—and only one night. No tickets, no critics. A chance for all their friends who were unemployed and not auditioning in August to get out of the city, get their hands dirty, have complete control over something. *True* community theater.

“I don’t know,” Julian said. “Seems like a lot.”

“If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work. Worth a try, right?”

What began the first summer at Stoneham as a lark, an experiment, quickly cemented into annual tradition.

The year of the photograph, one of the actors had documented the entire week of madness. Charlie was a big bear of a guy, bashful, the camera

around his neck an obvious shield for his offstage unease. One night while Flora and Margot were sitting on the porch steps, shucking corn for the nightly “family meal,” he’d grabbed Julian and David from the lawn, corralled Ruby, who was running around with a dish towel on her head pretending to be a princess, and tried to arrange them all on the steps of the house’s front porch.

Flora and Julian sat on the top step, Margot and David just below. Flora barely got Ruby situated next to her when she squirmed away and settled herself onto Margot’s lap. Ruby’s Margot fixation had started that summer. She followed Margot around the property like a duckling following her adopted mother. Margot looked back at Flora apologetically. “It’s fine,” Flora said, though it wasn’t. Julian moved closer to Flora, kissed her bare shoulder, looped his arm through hers. “Hey”—Flora reached over Margot’s shoulder and tapped Ruby’s arm, trying one more time—“you don’t want to sit on Mommy’s lap?”

Ruby shook her head no, but grudgingly reached up to take Flora’s hand. Charlie was fiddling with the lens and Ruby was restless, so Flora counted off on Ruby’s fingers, saying, “This little piggy went to market, this little piggy went home.”

“No, Mama!” Ruby said, but she was laughing. “You need my toes.”

“Okay,” Charlie finally said, “everyone look up.”

And miraculously, everyone had.

Flora and Julian’s heads were bent together, smiling straight into the camera. On the bottom step, David was slightly hunched forward, the conscious furling of a very tall man, his elegant surgeon’s hands clasped in front of him, his face half-turned to Margot, who was tan and blond and gleaming, her fingers laced together in front of Ruby’s buddha belly, her chin on Ruby’s head, her smile dazzling the camera. Ruby’s legs with their slightly dirty knees entangled with Margot’s longer ones. Ruby’s hair a mess of curls. Ruby shyly grinning, a finger pulling down the corner of her mouth, her other arm raised and that hand firmly implanted in Flora’s, a conduit between her mother and Margot.

They all looked so enmeshed and content and endearing and young. A family.

Flora put the photo in the pocket of her sweater and took a minute to savor her triumph—because this was what Flora did. In the division of labor, emotional and otherwise, that was their marriage, Flora was the

finder of lost things. The household St. Anthony. It was a point of pride for her (and a source of irritation for Julian) that when he declared something truly lost, she could usually find it within minutes by following the circuitous routes of his disheveled brain and figuring out his paces in real life. Was that how every couple functioned after time? Seeing the contours of someone else's intelligence so much more easily than your own?

She started putting all the folders and envelopes and notebooks and pens back in the cabinet drawer and decided to do a quick cull while Julian wasn't standing there to object, telling her to save it until he had a chance to look at everything himself, which would be approximately never. This was another area of her expertise, winnowing their lives down to essential parts, appointing herself judge and jury of the detritus of their past, deciding what would survive and what could go. They were so sentimental, her husband and daughter.

Flora did a quick check of the mostly empty notebooks. The cryptic scribblings couldn't have any meaning anymore. Trash. She tested all the markers, half of them spent of ink. She took one that worked and wrote general descriptions on the envelopes (POSTCARDS, FAMILY PHOTOS, PLAYBILLS). From the very back of the drawer, she pulled out a brown envelope stiff with age and something shiny and bright slipped out, a glint of gold on the cracked concrete floor. A ring.

A ring?

Flora immediately recognized it as Julian's wedding ring—*one* of Julian's wedding rings. To her chagrin, he was constantly losing them. How many so far? Three at least. The ring almost always went missing on set or in a theater because he had to take it off if it wasn't right for the part he was playing and also because he was so absentminded. She slipped the ring onto her thumb. Having an extra wouldn't hurt as he was sure to eventually lose the one he was wearing now.

Back in the kitchen, she removed the ring to take a closer look, and that's when she noticed something: the ring was engraved. The only ring they'd had engraved was the first one, because after that who had time? She was holding Julian's original wedding ring.

The chill started low and slow, deep in her gut. It took some seconds for her brain to catch up to the creeping realization moving through her body. Julian had lost the ring she was holding the summer of the photograph.

He'd come to her one afternoon, sheepish. He'd gone for a swim in the pond and somehow the ring had fallen off in the brackish water.

"Oh, well," Flora had said. "We'll have to get a new one." She didn't want to make him feel any worse than he did, so she didn't let on how sorry she was that he'd lost the ring. She was a little heartbroken. She'd loved that ring, which was too expensive but so pretty. The band was wide and flat with tiny little beading—milgrain—along the top and bottom. When she'd slid the ring on his finger the day they married and looked up at him, at his beautiful face, she'd thought, *Mine*.

And yet. The ring was right here in Flora's palm. It had been in an envelope at the bottom of the file cabinet in the garage.

Flora was perspiring in a different way now, a cold sweat despite her exertion and the rising sun. She had a sudden, sharp desire to call her mother, who had been gone for over a decade. She could almost feel her mother at her side, peering down at the ring with her familiar scowl, her booming voice full of dismay: *Flora. What in the name of g-o-d?*