

NOW IS NOT  
*the* TIME  
PANIC *to*  
A Novel

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

KEVIN  
WILSON

*Nothing  
to  
See Here*

**NOW** IS NOT  
*the*  
**TIME**  
*to*  
**PANIC** *A Novel*

**KEVIN  
WILSON**

**ecco**

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## **Dedication**

In memory of Eric Matthew Hailey

(1973–2020)

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## Mazzy Brower

I ANSWERED THE PHONE, AND THERE WAS A WOMAN'S VOICE on the other end, a voice that I didn't recognize. "Is this Frances Budge?" she asked, and I was certain it was a telemarketer, because nobody called me Frances. In the living room, my seven-year-old daughter had made her own set of drums, including a tin plate for a cymbal, so it was loud as hell in the house, with this ting-bang-ting-ting-bang rhythm she had going on. I said, "I'm sorry, but I'm not interested," and started to hang up, but the woman, understanding that I was done with her, tried her best to pull me in.

"The edge is a shantytown filled with gold seekers," she said, her voice rising in pitch, and I froze. I nearly dropped the phone. And together, in harmony, we both completed the phrase, "We are fugitives, and the law is skinny with hunger for us."

"So you know it," the woman said.

"I've heard it before, yeah, of course," I said, already trying to run away. I could feel the world spinning around me. *Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, fuck, no* in my head, a kind of spiraling madness, because, you know, it had been so long ago. Because, I guess, I'd let myself think that no one would ever find out. But she'd found me. And I was already trying to figure out how to get lost again, to stay lost.

"I'm writing an article for the *New Yorker*," she told me. "My name is Mazzy Brower, and I'm an art critic. I'm writing about the Coalfield Panic of 1996."

"Okay," I said.

"Mom!" my daughter Junie was shouting. "Listen! Listen to me! Listen! It's 'Wipe Out,' right? Doesn't this sound just like 'Wipe Out'? Mom? Listen!"

"And I think you made it happen," the woman said, treading carefully. Her voice sounded nice, honest.

"You think I made it?" I said, almost laughing, but it was true. I *had* made it. Not just me, but I was part of it. Me and one other person.

“I’m almost one hundred percent certain that it was you,” Mazzy Brower said.

“Oh god,” I said, and I realized I was saying it out loud. My daughter was banging away. I felt dizzy. There was a pizza in the oven. My husband was finally fixing the latch on a window in our bedroom, which we’d been meaning to fix for four solid months. Our life, which was so boring and normal, was still happening. Right at this moment, as everything was changing, it was like my life didn’t know it yet. It didn’t know to just stop, to freeze, because nothing was going to be the same. Let the pizza burn. Forget about that stupid, shitty latch on the window. Pack up your stuff. Let’s get the hell out of here. Let’s burn down the house and start over. For a split second, I thought maybe just *I* could get out of here and start over.

“Was it you?” the reporter asked. Why had I picked up the phone?

“Yes,” I finally said, and I could feel my whole body being pulled through time. “Yes, it was me.”

“Just you?” she asked.

“It’s complicated,” I replied. My daughter was now standing beside me, pulling on the back of my shirt. “Mama?” she asked. “Who are you talking to?”

“Just a friend,” I told her.

“Let me talk to her,” Junie said, the most confident person I’d ever known, holding out her hand for the phone.

“I have to go,” I said to Mazzy.

“Can we meet?”

“No,” I said.

“Can I call you back?”

“Sorry, no,” I told her. And before she could say anything else, I hung up the phone.

I started to pace around the kitchen, trying to remember every word of the conversation, what I’d said to this woman. But Junie hates pacing, hates when she sees me go inside myself, and so she started tugging on my pants.

“What’s your friend’s name?” Junie asked.

“What? Oh . . . Mazzy,” I said.

“Mazzy sounds like an imaginary friend,” Junie said.

“Maybe she is,” I told her. “I’m not entirely sure that she’s real.”

“You’re so weird, Mama,” Junie said, smiling. And then, like it didn’t matter at all, because she’d already forgotten, she said, “Listen to me play



these crazy drums!”

There was still time. I sat on the couch. And I watched my daughter, with two wooden spoons in her hands, absolutely whale away on anything that was around her. And my heart was pounding in my chest. It was over, I kept thinking. It was all over. And it was beginning. It was just beginning.

**Part I**

The Edge Is a Shantytown Filled with Gold Seekers

SUMMER 1996

# One

AT THE COALFIELD PUBLIC POOL, THEY WOULD BLOW A WHISTLE and everybody had to get out of the water, and we'd all stand there, hopping on one foot and then the other because the concrete was so damn hot, burning the bottoms of our feet. And some lifeguard, barely older than I was, sixteen, looking like the bad guy in a teen movie, blond and buff and absolutely never going to save you if you were drowning, would wheel out a greased watermelon. There was a three-inch layer of Vaseline, which made the watermelon shiny, almost like it was turning from a solid into a liquid. And the lifeguard and one of his evil twins, maybe with crazier muscles and a scuzzy mustache, would dump this watermelon into the water and then push it to the middle of the pool.

And when they blew their whistles, the point was to jump into the water, and then whoever could get the watermelon to the edge of the pool would win it. You had to team up, really, to reasonably expect to win the thing, and so the game would turn into a kind of gang war, boys basically beating the shit out of each other, this watermelon slipping and sliding away from them, almost an afterthought. By the time it made it to the edge, the watermelon was covered in gouges from fingernails, pieces of the red meat of the fruit spilling out of it, pretty much inedible to anyone except the person who'd won it. I was smart enough to stay away, though it made me mad that no girls ever really took part, like we were too delicate for things like this. But the only time I'd tried, when I was twelve, some old man with a snake tattoo on his arm elbowed me in the face and nearly knocked out my front teeth.

The triplets, my brothers, were perfect for the greased watermelon contest, because they were eighteen and already giant. They were nearly feral, possessing a kind of strength that wasn't just physical but a psychosis that made them impervious to pain, which they tested out on each other all the time. But they didn't take part, either, because they used this time while everyone else was hypnotized by the watermelon to steal money and snacks from unattended bags.

I was standing there, my feet blistering, wondering why I didn't just go lie down on my towel and wait for the time when I could safely wade back into the pool and . . . what, exactly? Just keep wading around and around, so you could never quite tell that I was alone? I hated the pool, but the A/C had blown out back home and it would be another day before it was fixed. I'd held out for two straight days, sweating and miserable, but finally hopped in the van with my brothers that morning. Honestly, if I had to be here, I wanted to see the fight over this thing. I wanted to hear the shouts and curses. I wanted to see violence done in the name of fun.

A boy was watching me from across the pool. I could see him, skinny and twitchy, probably about my age, and every single time I caught him looking at me, he'd smile this goofy smile and then stare down at the water, the sun reflecting off of it so brightly that it was blinding. I lost sight of him. Any second now, the lifeguards were going to blow their whistles. And then I felt somebody touch my elbow, which for some reason felt really intimate and weird, someone's fingers on my rough, bony elbow. I whirled around, and it was the boy, his eyes black, his hair black, his teeth bright white and painfully crooked. "Hey," he said, and I pulled my arm away from him.

"Don't touch people that don't like being touched," I told him. He held up his hands in surrender, looking shy all of a sudden. Who touches a girl's elbow and then gets shy?

"Sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. I'm new. I just moved here. I don't know anybody. I've been watching you. It looks like you don't know anybody, either."

"I know everyone," I said, gesturing to the entire congregation of poolgoers. "I know them all. I just don't *like* them."

He nodded. He understood. "Will you help me get this watermelon?" he asked.

"Me?" I asked, confused.

“You and me,” he said. “I think we can do it.”

“Okay, sure,” I said, nodding, smiling.

“All right,” he said, his face brightening. “What’s your name?” he asked me.

“Frankie,” I told him.

“Cool. I like girls who have boys’ names,” he told me, like he was the most open-minded boy who had ever lived.

“Frankie isn’t a boy’s name. It’s unisex.”

“My name is Zeke,” he told me.

“Zeke?” I said.

“Ezekiel,” he explained. “It’s biblical. But it’s my middle name. I’m trying it out this summer. Just to see how it sounds.”

I was looking at him. He wasn’t handsome; all of his features were too big, cartoonish. But I wasn’t pretty, either. I had a really plain face. I convinced myself, at the right angle, that even though I was plain, it was temporary and soon I’d be pretty. I told myself that I definitely wasn’t ugly. My brothers, however, said I was ugly. Whatever. I cared so much, but I put a lot of effort into not caring. I was punk rock. Maybe it was better to be ugly if the alternative was to be plain.

The whistle blew, and we were just staring at each other, but then he said, “C’mon. We can do this!” and he jumped right into the pool. I did not jump into the pool. I just stood there. I smirked, watched him bob in the water. And he looked so hurt. It made me feel real shitty. Finally, he shrugged and started splashing toward the commotion, toward that roiling mass of teenage boys, all fighting over something so stupid, for fun.

Zeke tried two or three times, but he kept getting roughly tossed aside, dunked under the water, and he’d come up gasping, coughing, looking so lost out there on his own. But he kept climbing over people, trying to get his hands on the watermelon, which was so slippery that no one could really control it. And then somebody kicked him accidentally in the mouth and I saw that his lip was busted. It was bleeding, dripping into the pool, but the lifeguards did not give a shit. I don’t think they were even watching. And Zeke just jumped back into the crowd, and I started to get worried. I knew something bad would happen to someone this clueless.

Before I could think about it, I was running over to my brother Andrew, who had, like, seven bags of snack-size Doritos, and I told him that I needed his help. Right then, Brian came over, a wad of damp dollar bills in

his fist. “C’mon, Andrew,” he said, completely ignoring me. “We don’t have all day.”

“I need help,” I said, and by this point, Charlie had come over, wondering what was going on. “I need you to help this boy get the watermelon,” I told all three of them.

“Fuck no,” Charlie said. “No way.”

“Please?” I asked them.

“Sorry, Frankie,” Andrew told me, and they started to run off, but I shouted, “I’ll give you twenty dollars!”

“Twenty bucks?” Brian asked. “No shit?”

“Twenty bucks,” I said.

“And what do we do now?”

“See that nerdy kid in the water? With the busted lip?” I told them. They all nodded. “Help him get the watermelon,” I said. It was pretty simple, but they kept staring at the watermelon.

“You in love with him?” Charlie asked me, grinning.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think I feel sorry for him.”

“Yikes,” Andrew said, grimacing, like I was cursed. “Fine. We’ll do it.” And my brothers dropped all the stuff they were carrying and ran to the edge of the pool, cannonballing into the water. Andrew grabbed Zeke like a rag doll and basically carried him toward the watermelon while Brian and Charlie cleared a path using their elbows, the ferocity of their actions overwhelming the other kids, who had been wrestling over the watermelon for long enough that they were starting to tire out. When they got possession of the watermelon, a sorry-looking sight, Andrew threw Zeke onto it, and the triplets pushed him to the edge of the water, Zeke’s mouth dripping blood onto the Vaseline. And then it was over. Zeke had won.

The lifeguards blew their whistles, and the other kids acted like they didn’t care. Their chests and arms were glistening with the grease, and it wasn’t coming off in the water, but they just started splashing around, waiting for the girls to get back into the pool, the kids in their floaties, the dads with their beer guts and sad tattoos.

I walked over to the edge of the pool, where Zeke was trying to catch his breath. My brothers had already left, gone to find new ways to distract themselves.

“You did it,” I said.

“Who were those boys?” he asked, so confused.

“My brothers,” I told him.

“You did this?” he asked me, and I nodded. We both laughed.

“Your mouth is bleeding,” I told him, but he didn’t seem to care. We both stared at the watermelon, which looked like a horror movie, so many half-moon marks digging into the green rind, that greasy, disgusting film all over it.

“Will you eat this with me?” he asked.

“You’re going to fucking eat that?” I asked.

“We’re going to eat it,” he said, smiling. And we did. We really did. It was so good.