

a novel

THE
COLLECTED
REGRETS OF
CLOVER

MIKKI BRAMMER

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OF CLOVER

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For Carl Lindgren, who taught me to look for the beauty where there is seemingly none. And for the women of Cloverlea, who taught me to look for the magic.

1

The first time I watched someone die, I was five.

Mr. Hyland, my kindergarten teacher, was a cheerful, tubby man whose shiny scalp and perfectly round face reminded me of the moon. One afternoon, my classmates and I sat cross-legged on the scratchy carpet in front of him, enthralled by his theatrical telling of *Peter Rabbit*. I remember how his meaty thighs spilled over the edges of the child-sized wooden chair he sat on. His cheeks were rosier than usual, but who could blame him for getting excited over a good Beatrix Potter plot?

As the story reached its climax—when Peter Rabbit lost his jacket fleeing the evil Mr. McGregor—Mr. Hyland stopped, as if pausing for emphasis. We stared up at him, hearts thumping with anticipation. But instead of resuming his narration, he made a sound similar to a hiccup, eyes bulging.

Then, like a felled redwood tree, he toppled to the ground.

We all sat motionless, wide-eyed, unsure if our beloved teacher was just upping the ante on his usual dramatic storytelling. When he hadn't moved after several minutes—not even to blink his open eyes—the room erupted with squeals of panic from everyone.

Everyone except for me, that is.

I moved close enough to Mr. Hyland to hear the final push of air from his lungs. As the pandemonium echoed down the hall and other teachers rushed into the classroom, I sat beside him, holding his hand calmly as the last blush of red disappeared from his face.

The school recommended I get counseling following the “incident.” But my parents, who were more than a little self-absorbed, noted no significant

change in my behavior. They bought me an ice cream, patted me on the head, and—reasoning that I'd always been slightly odd—judged me to be fine.

Mostly, I was fine. But I've wondered ever since what Mr. Hyland would have liked his last words to be if they hadn't been about the antics of a particularly naughty rabbit.

2

I didn't mean to keep count of how many people I'd watched die since Mr. Hyland thirty-one years ago, but my subconscious was a diligent accountant. Especially since I was nearing a pretty impressive milestone—today the tally nudged up to ninety-seven.

I stood on Canal Street watching the taillights of the mortuary van merge into traffic. Like a runner who'd just passed the baton, my job was done.

Amid the exhaust fumes and pungent blend of dried fish and tamarind, the scent of death still lingered in my nostrils. I don't mean the odor of a body decomposing—I never really had to deal with that, since I only ever sat with the dying as they hovered on the threshold between this world and the next. I'm talking about that other scent, the distinct smell when death is imminent. It's hard to describe, but it's like that imperceptible shift between summer and fall when somehow the air is different but you don't know why. I'd become attuned to that smell in my years as a death doula. That's how I knew someone was ready to go. And if there were loved ones there, I'd let them know that now was the moment to say their goodbyes. But today there were no loved ones. You'd be surprised how often it happens. In fact, if it weren't for me, at least half of those ninety-seven people would've died alone. There may be almost nine million people living here, but New York is a city of lonely people full of regrets. It's my job to make their final moments a little less lonesome.

A social worker had referred me to Guillermo a month ago.

"I've got to warn you," she'd said on the phone. "He's an angry and bitter old one."

I didn't mind—usually that just means the person is feeling scared, unloved, and alone. So when Guillermo hardly even acknowledged me on the first few visits, I didn't take it personally. Then, when I was late to the fourth visit because I'd accidentally locked myself out of my apartment, he looked at me with tears in his eyes as I sat down beside his bed.

"I thought you weren't coming," he said with the quiet despair of a forgotten child.

"I promise you that won't happen," I said, pressing his leathery hand between mine.

And I always keep my word. Shepherding a dying person through the last days of their life is a privilege—especially when you're the only thing they have to hold on to.

★ ★ ★

Snowflakes whirled erratically as I began my walk home from Guillermo's cramped studio apartment in Chinatown. I could've taken the bus, but it always felt disrespectful to slot right back into routine life when someone had just lost theirs. I liked to feel the icy breeze nibbling at my cheeks as I walked, to watch the cloud materialize then vanish with each of my breaths—confirmations that I was still here, still living.

For someone so accustomed to witnessing death, I always felt a little adrift afterward. A person was here on earth and now they were gone. Where, I didn't know—I was mostly agnostic when it came to spiritual matters, which helped me make room for my clients' chosen faiths. Wherever he was, I hoped Guillermo had been able to leave his bitterness behind. From what I could tell, he hadn't been on very good terms with God. A small wooden crucifix hung adjacent to his single bed, the torn, yellowed wallpaper curling around its corners. But Guillermo never looked at it directly to seek comfort; he snuck darting glances, as if avoiding the scrutinizing gaze of an authority figure. Mostly, he positioned himself with his back to it.

In the three weeks I spent visiting Guillermo, I'd learned the details of his living space by heart. The thick layer of grime on the outside of his only window that muted the daylight, rendering the space fittingly somber. The piercing shriek of metal against metal from his decrepit bed frame every time

he adjusted his weight. The bone-chilling draft that came from everywhere and nowhere. The sparse occupants of his kitchen cabinets—one cup, one bowl, one plate—that were testaments to a life of loneliness.

Guillermo and I probably only exchanged a total of ten sentences during those weeks. We didn't need to say more than that. I always let the dying person take the lead, to decide if they want to fill their final days with conversation or to revel in silence. They don't need to verbalize their decision; I can just tell. It's my job to stay calm and present, letting them take up space as they navigate those last precious moments of life.

The most important thing is never to look away from someone's pain. Not just the physical pain of their body shutting down, but the emotional pain of watching their life end while knowing they could have lived it better. Giving someone the chance to be seen at their most vulnerable is much more healing than any words. And it was my honor to do that—to look them in the eye and acknowledge their hurt, to let it exist undiluted—even when the sadness was overwhelming.

Even when my heart was breaking for them.

★ ★ ★

The warmth of my apartment was almost stifling compared to Guillermo's place. I shrugged off my coat and balanced it on top of the mass of winter attire on the rack by my front door. The rack protested, sending my wool peacoat into a crumpled heap on the floor. I left it be, telling myself—as I did with most of the accumulating clutter in my apartment—that I'd deal with it later.

To be fair, not all of the clutter belonged to me. I'd inherited the enviably located two-bedroom from my grandfather after he died. Well, technically, I'd been on the lease since I was a kid. It was a shrewd move on his part to ensure that no amount of New York City real estate bureaucracy could cheat me out of my rightful claim to his rent-controlled legacy. For seventeen years, we'd shared the third-floor apartment in a brownstone that looked comparatively unloved next to its manicured West Village neighbors. Grandpa had been gone for more than thirteen years now, but I still couldn't bring myself to sort through his belongings. Instead, I'd gradually slotted my

own possessions in the limited spaces between his. Even though I spent my days looking death in the face, I still couldn't seem to accept that his absence from my life was permanent.

Grief plays tricks on you that way—a familiar whiff of cologne or a potential sighting of your person in a crowd, and all the knots you've tied inside yourself to manage the pain of losing them suddenly unravel.

Warming my hands around a steaming cup of Earl Grey, I stood in front of my bookshelves, which were packed tightly with Grandpa's biology textbooks, musty atlases, and sea-faring novels. Wedged in between them, three dilapidated notebooks stood out, not so much for their appearance, but for the single word inscribed on the spine of each. On the first, REGRETS; the second, ADVICE; the third, CONFESSIONS. Aside from my pets, these were the things I'd save in a fire.

Ever since I started working as a death doula, I'd had the same ritual, documenting each client's final words before the breath had left their body. Over the years, I'd found that people often felt the need to say something as they were dying, something of significance—as if they realized it was their last chance to leave a mark on the world. Usually those last messages fit into one of three categories: things they'd wish they'd done differently, things they'd learned along the way, or secrets they'd kept that they were finally ready to reveal. Collecting these words felt like my sacred duty, especially when I was the only other person in the room. And even when I wasn't, family members were usually too consumed with grief to think about writing down such things. My emotions, on the other hand, were always neatly tucked away.

Setting my tea aside, I stretched on tiptoes to retrieve the book titled CONFESSIONS. It'd been a while since I'd been able to make an entry in this one. Lately, it seemed like everyone had reached the end of their lives with regrets.

I nestled into the sofa and flipped through the leather-bound notebook to a clean page. In my compact scrawl, I inscribed Guillermo's name, address, the day's date, and his confession. I hadn't expected it, to be honest—I'd sensed him slipping away and thought he was already unconscious. But then his eyes opened and he put his hand on my arm. Not dramatically, but lightly, as if he'd been on his way out the door and had forgotten to tell me something.

“I accidentally killed my little sister’s hamster when I was eleven,” he whispered. “I left the door of its cage open to annoy her and then it went missing. We found it three days later wedged between the sofa cushions.”

As soon as the words departed his lips, his body relaxed with serene weightlessness, like he was floating on his back in a swimming pool.

Then he was gone.

★ ★ ★

I couldn’t help thinking about that hamster as my own pets gathered around me on the sofa that evening. George, the chubby bulldog I’d found six years ago burrowing through the trash cans downstairs, rested his wet chin on my knee. Lola and Lionel, the tabby siblings I’d rescued as kittens from a box left outside the church on Carmine Street, took turns slinking figure eights around my ankles. The silkiness of their fur soothed me.

I tried not to imagine whether the hamster had suffered. They were pretty feeble creatures, so it probably hadn’t taken much. Poor Guillermo, carrying that guilt with him for fifty years.

I glanced at my phone, balanced on the faded sofa arm. The only time it ever rang—aside from robocalls about car insurance and fake IRS audits—was when someone wanted to hire me. Socializing was a skill I’d never really mastered. When you’re an only child raised by your introverted grandfather, you learn to appreciate your own company. It wasn’t that I was opposed to the idea of friendship; it’s just that if you don’t get close to anyone, you can’t lose them. And I’d already lost enough people.

Still, sometimes I wondered how I got to this point: thirty-six years old and my whole life revolved around waiting for strangers to die.

Savoring the bergamot vapor from my tea, I closed my eyes and let my body relax for the first time in weeks. Holding in your emotions all the time is kind of exhausting, but it’s what makes me good at what I do. It’s my responsibility to always remain placid and even-keeled for my clients, even when they’re frightened and panicking and don’t know how to let go.

As my feelings began to thaw, I leaned back into the sofa cushions, allowing the weight of sadness to settle across my chest and a yearning to squeeze my heart.

There's a reason I know this city's full of lonely people.
I'm one of them.