


THE INVISIBLE WOMAN



a Thriller

JAMES PATTERSON

AND

SUSAN DiLALLO

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

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For my dad
Joseph M. Katz
who missed all the good stuff
—S.D.

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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

CHAPTER 1

MY NAME IS ELINOR GILBERT. And I am the Invisible Woman.

No, not the kind that can make a deck of cards look like it's shuffling itself.

The other kind.

Two years at the same dry cleaner, and he still asks my name when I drop something off.

Five years at the same drugstore, and I doubt the pharmacist could pick me out of a lineup.

My kind of invisible isn't fantasy or science fiction. It's real. It happens slowly, over time. And you won't even know it's happening.

Then one day you're in line at Whole Foods, feeling good about yourself and your healthy life choices—a cart full of plant-based ground meat, oat milk, fat-free yogurt, and organic broccoli (and deftly hidden under all that, a chocolate fudge cake that serves four)—when some guy scoots in front of you. So you say, very nicely, "Excuse me. I think I was next."

And the jerk says, "Oh, sorry, lady. I didn't even *see* you."

Say *what*?

That's when you start to notice how things have changed.

Those annoying wolf whistles from construction workers that you found so demeaning at the time? Gone.

Those makeup ladies in Bloomingdale's who tried to spritz you with the latest Eau de Something New and Fabulous? History.

Sure, those nice-looking guys on the bus are still there. And they still try to catch your eye. But now, it's to offer you their seat.

Somehow, when I wasn't looking, I seem to have passed my sell-by date. And there's nothing I can do about it.

Well, except for that chocolate fudge cake.

CHAPTER 2

THE GRIDDLER IS TECHNICALLY a coffee shop. But the staff lets you sit for hours, even if you're not working on a screenplay.

Another plus: They make a great Cobb salad. Huge homemade croutons, chunks of free-range roast chicken, and a giant crispy X of bacon across the top.

My waiter today, Desmond, takes my order as if he's doing me a favor. My guess is, he's an actor wannabe, hoping to be noticed by all the screenwriter wannabes nearby. He's sized me up and decided I can do nothing to further his career.

But a simple snub won't spoil this glorious Sunday in early October.

As I nurse my last glass of summer rosé, something Eleanor Roosevelt once said pops into my head: *No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.* That Eleanor. What a trouper. She had a mother-in-law who hated her and a skirt-chasing husband who humiliated her with a gaggle of willing women and one in particular: Missy LeHand. His tall, beautiful, very *public* private secretary who, according to rumor, made FDR's Warm Springs summer cottage quite a bit warmer.

But Eleanor was not one for pity parties. I raise my glass and silently toast her and her dignity as Desmond shows up with my salad and a bowl of blue cheese dressing on the side.

I look around. Except for the usual handful of scruffy writers typing away on laptops, I have the place pretty much to myself. So it surprises me to see an older man swivel from the cash register, bypass all the empty tables, and head in my direction with a cup of coffee. I don't have my distance glasses on, but he seems to be smiling. At me? The Invisible Woman? Maybe he didn't get the memo.

But as he gets closer, I see it's not a smile at all. It's a smirk.
I'd know that smirk anywhere.

It's Alan Metcalf. Somebody I used to work with. Somebody from my days at the FBI. Somebody who—

Well, rather than use some really ugly expletives here, I'll just say this: He's the guy who threw me under the bus.

"Elinor dear," he says, drawing it out in that slow Southern drawl he affects to sound sexy. (Now it's my turn to smirk. I know he grew up in New Jersey.) I'm delighted to see that the years have not been kind to him. What he's lost in hair, he's more than made up for in belly fat. But Metcalf is still pretty much as I remember him: a small man who has convinced himself that arrogance makes him look taller.

"It's been a while," he says.

Not long enough, I think. He eyes the empty seat at my table, hoping I'll ask him to join me. I don't.

"May I?" he finally says. Before I can reply, he pulls the chair out to sit and spills coffee on his sleeve. I try not to laugh.

"You're looking well," he says. He doesn't mean it. He'd say the same thing to a leper. "This is quite the coincidence," he adds. Lie number two.

"No, Metcalf," I say. "Thomas Jefferson and John Adams dying within hours of each other on the Fourth of July? *That's* a coincidence. You being here is not."

"You know me too well," he says. Wrong. I know the *FBI* too well. I know that when they want something, nothing will stand in their way.

"So—to what do I owe this honor?" I ask.

He looks around cautiously to make sure none of the scruffy writers are eavesdropping on what an even scruffier middle-management government guy in a cheap suit has to say.

"We need you," he says. "We have a surveillance assignment. And you're the perfect person to help us out."

Is he kidding?

"Love to help you out," I say. "But I gotta go home and shampoo a rug."

"Now, listen—"

"No. *You* listen," I say. "I'm sure several of the ten thousand FBI agents out there would jump at the chance to work for someone with your level of integrity."

Metcalf's so vain, he probably considers that a compliment.

I return to my salad and spear a particularly crisp piece of bacon, hoping he'll leave me alone. Or die. Whichever comes sooner.

"At least hear me out," he says. "This is something you'd be great at."

Am I curious? Of course. But I'll be damned if I'll let him see that.

"Whatever it is, Metcalf, I'm all wrong for it now. Fact is, I've got a new career I love."

He laughs. "I'd hardly call what you have now a *career*," he says. "You've been teaching music to a bunch of overprivileged private-school kids you can't stand. The only thing you love about it is getting summers off."

"Look, I'm really not—"

"Which means you can get a job at a music camp every July, then pop over to Europe every August. You've got a friend from college living in Paris and an ex-beau in Rome."

"Very good," I say. "Now, for your ten-point bonus question: What was my mother's maiden name?"

I can't believe this guy. Does he really expect me to jump all over him with gratitude?

As Metcalf shakes his head, pondering his next move, his jowls sway like drapes. "Okay. You win," he says at last. "Go back to your lunch. But let me just say: If you can see your way clear to letting bygones be bygones, this assignment is very important to us. Do this, and we'll make it worth your while. And as far as your *reputation* goes..."

I put my fork down with a clunk. There it is. The magic word. My *reputation*.

"Okay. Tell me about it."

"Not here," he says. "This job is way too under-the-radar, and there's a lot of backstory. Come by my office tomorrow, and I'll tell you everything. Around ten?"

"And what if I say no?"

"You won't," he says. He crushes his cardboard coffee cup and leaves it on my table. One final smirk, and he's gone.

And once again, just like the old days, I'm the one who has to clean up his garbage.