

# THE VILLA

A NOVEL

**RACHEL  
HAWKINS**

*NEW YORK TIMES*  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
OF *THE WIFE UPSTAIRS*



THE  
VILLA



Rachel  
Hawkins



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For Mary and Claire

*Houses remember.*

*That was what Mr. O'Hare had said to Victoria the first day she and her family came to Somerton, the day that began the end of everything.*

*At the time, she'd liked the sound of that. Somerton was an old house, after all, and the idea of its papered walls and mullioned windows holding the secrets and dreams of all who had walked its halls appealed to her. She hadn't thought that perhaps houses hold on to the bad with the good, just as people do.*

*But why would she ever have thought that there might be bad memories in such a place? That summer, the last good season of her life, was such a glorious one, full of blue skies and lemon-yellow sun, and there was no sign of all the horror to come. There were only warm, lazy days, the soft hum of bees in tall flowers, the silky feel of grass against her calves as she walked through the fields surrounding the house.*

*She had forgotten, as we all do, that beautiful things can contain their own darkness.*

—*Lilith Rising*, Mari Godwick, 1976

With its publication in 1976, *Lilith Rising* blew open the doors of the Boys Club occupied by such horror authors as William Peter Blatty, Jay Anson, and Thomas Tryon, a feat made even more impressive by the youth of its author. Blatty was forty-three when *The Exorcist* was published, Anson fifty-six when *The Amityville Horror* was unleashed. Tryon had already had an established Hollywood career as both an actor and writer before *The Other* put him on the map as one of America's preeminent writers of horror.

But the author of *Lilith Rising* was a girl just barely over the drinking age, a petite English redhead named Mari Godwick.

Of course, by the time *Lilith Rising* was published, her name was already famous. Infamous, even. But even if it hadn't been for the events of the summer of 1974 (sometimes luridly referred to as "The Villa Rosato Horror"), *Lilith Rising* would've caused a sensation. Horror had, after all, been mostly the territory of men, until Mari Godwick and her creation—some say avatar—Victoria Stuart stormed onto the scene.

Even divorced from its real-life history of violence, the book shocks. Victoria is no victim, no screaming girl covered in blood. She brings about the destruction of those she loves with no regret, single-minded in her focus in the way teenage girls certainly are in real life, but had not been permitted to be in the realms of horror fiction.

Mari Godwick was asked time and time again if she was Victoria, and her answer, given with an enigmatic smile, was always the same.

"We all are."

—*The Lady and the Monster: Women in Horror, 1932–1990*, Dr. Elisabeth Radnor, University of Georgia Press, 2001

## CHAPTER ONE

Somewhere around the time she started calling herself “Chess,” I realized I might actually hate my best friend.

It was the third name she’d given herself in the nearly twenty years I’d known her. When we’d met in fourth grade, she was just Jessica. Well, “Jessica C.,” since there was also “Jessica M.,” and “Jessica R.,” and then one girl who just got to be Jessica, like she’d claimed the name first, and everyone else just had to fucking deal with it. So I guess it wasn’t a surprise that by the time we were sophomores, Jessica C. had turned herself into “JC,” which eventually morphed into “Jaycee.”

That lasted until halfway through college. Sometime between her third and fourth change of major, she became simply, “Jay,” holding on to that moniker until ten years ago, right after we both turned twenty-five and she’d finally broken up with that asshole, Lyle. That’s when Chess was born.

Chess Chandler.

I can’t deny that it sounds good, and it definitely looks good printed in giant font on the book I’m currently holding in my lap as I wait for Chess to meet me for lunch.

She’s late, because she’s always late, even though I’d purposely shown up fifteen minutes after I’d told her to meet me, hoping to avoid this very situation. But of course, just as I sat down, I’d gotten a text from her. *Leaving now!*

So I was on my second iced tea, and my third piece of bread at this little café in Asheville, the kind of place I’d thought Jessica—*Chess*—would like, waiting for the real Chess while the picture of her splashed across her book cover beamed back at me.

She’s sitting on the floor in the photo, wearing a white shirt and jeans, her feet bare, her toenails painted a bright melon, pose casual and smile bright under the title *You Got This!*



That's her thing: the self-help beat. She sort of fell into it when a friend of ours from college, Stefanie, started a website, some kind of women and wellness thing that I can't even remember the name of. Chess started out doing a little advice feature for the site, and one of her answers, encouraging a woman to break up with her shitty boyfriend and leave her shitty job, went viral.

I understood why. The response was classic Chess: breezy and funny, but also getting to the heart of the matter in a way that was blunt without being cruel. *You know what you have to do here—I mean, you wrote to me, you're obviously smart (except where it comes to guys. And jobs. But we can fix that).*

I'd been getting pep talks like this from her for years, after all. Still, I thought the biggest it would get was a BuzzFeed article called "Twenty-seven Reasons We Want to Make This Advice Columnist Our Bestie!!"

But somehow, it just kept growing. Suddenly, her Insta-gram had thousands, then *hundreds* of thousands of followers. She stopped writing for Stefanie's site and took a job at Salon, then the Cut, and then there was a book deal. *Things My Mama Never Taught Me* hit every bestseller list there is, and before I knew it, Chess was famous.

And honestly, she deserved to be. She was *good* at this stuff. I've read all her books and watched all her videos, including her big TED Talk that has something like twenty million views on YouTube. I've also spent a lot of time wondering how someone you once played Barbies with can now be talking to Oprah—at *Oprah's damn house*, no less—telling women how to get their lives on the "Powered Path."

I tear off another hunk of bread.

My life is most definitely not on the Powered Path these days, and if I'm honest, that might be part of the reason I don't like Chess that much anymore.

Well, that and the fact that she's now—I check my phone—*thirty* minutes late.

Just when I'm starting to think I should go ahead and order, the door of the café opens, and she breezes in, tall and very blond, a whirlwind in shades of white, one hand already lifted in greeting as she shoves her giant sunglasses on top of her head, a pearl-gray leather bag slung over one shoulder. She's always like this, perpetually in motion, her body seeming to move in ten directions at once, but every gesture somehow graceful, fluid.

Heads turn when she enters, but I can't tell if that's because people recognize her or if it's just her—that energy, that glow.

I stand up too fast to hug her, my thighs hitting the edge of the table, ice rattling in the water glasses, and then I'm enveloped in a cloud of Jo Malone perfume.

"Emmmm," Chess says, hugging me tight.

And even though I was thoroughly irritated with her just a few seconds ago, I instantly feel that familiar warmth in my chest. She's the only person who ever calls me "Em." I've been Emily to everyone my entire life except her, and hearing it drawled in that low-country accent she's never lost brings back all the good memories—the years of slumber parties, driving in her car with the windows down, scream-singing with the radio, sitting on her couch at her beach house on Kiawah Island, giggling over glasses of white wine. A million things that immediately outweigh her perpetual lateness and make me feel guilty for ever thinking anything bad about her.

As she pulls back, Chess studies me, putting one cool palm against my cheek. "You look better," she says, and I manage a smile, patting her hand before returning to my seat.

"I feel better," I tell her as I sit down. "Mostly."

I brace myself for more questions, and given how sick I've gotten of talking about my health over the past year, I'm already formulating a way to brush her off, but then Chess spots her book on the table, and gives a pealing laugh.

"Oh my god, did you bring that for me to sign?"

Her green eyes are bright as she sinks into her chair, slinging her bag over the back. "I would've sent you one, you know."

It's stupid to feel embarrassed around someone who has held your hair back while you puke, on multiple occasions, but my face goes a little hot as I wave at the book.

"It's my mom's," I tell her. "I made the mistake of telling her I was seeing you today, and the next thing I know, this is in my mailbox with a Post-it."

*Get Jessica to sign this, please! She can make it out to me. (Deborah.)*

Chess snorts now as she picks up the book. "Classic Deb," she says, and then once again, she performs one of those magic acts of hers—pulling a pen out of that enormous bag, signing the book, signaling to the waiter, ordering a glass of wine, all as she scrawls her signature across the title page.

Sometimes I feel tired just watching her.

Handing the book to me, Chess leans back in her chair and pushes her hair away from her face.

She looks different these days, thinner and blonder, but I can still see the girl I met the first day of fourth grade at Johnson Elementary, just outside of Asheville. The girl with a splash of freckles across her nose, big eyes and wide cheekbones, who'd leaned forward and conspiratorially whispered, "I'm glad I'm sitting next to you."

It's funny how such a little thing can form a lifelong bond.

"So, how's your writing going?" she asks as the waiter brings her wine. I'm sticking with iced tea, still on a handful of medications that I don't want to mix with alcohol, and take a sip before answering her.

"It's okay," I finally say. "Been a little slow getting back into it after ... everything."

*Everything.*

It's the only word that can sum up what a complete and utter shit show this past year has been for me, but it still comes nowhere close to touching it.

Career stalling out? Check.

Health suddenly terrible for no reason that any doctor can figure out? Check.

Husband deciding to leave after seven years of seemingly happy marriage?

Fucking *check*.

It's been over six months since Matt left, and I keep waiting for all of it to hurt less, for it to be less messy, less ... I don't know. Clichéd. Humiliating. My mom actually asked me the other day if I was thinking about moving back in with them, and given the state of my finances—between a late book and an increasingly expensive divorce—I'd actually started considering it. Chess watches me now, her brows drawn together, and then she pulls her leg up, her heel on the edge of her chair, her arms wrapped around her knee, a position I've literally never seen anyone contort themselves into in a restaurant. I guess once you've pulled the same move on Oprah's couch, you can do what you want.

I wave a hand. "Seriously, it's fine," I tell her. "The latest book is, like, epically late, but it's book ten in the series, and book nine's sales weren't exactly setting the publishing world on fire, so I don't think anyone's all that concerned." No one except for me, but that's a different story.

Chess shrugs, the silver bangles on her wrist rattling. "People have no taste, then. *A Deadly Dig* was my favorite so far. That bit at the end on the beach where you're, like, 'Oh shit, the wife and the best friend did it *together!*'" She leans forward, beaming as she grabs my hand across the table. "So damn smart!"

Flopping back into her chair, she keeps smiling at me. "You were always so damn smart."

Feeling almost absurdly pleased, I pick at another piece of bread. “You read *A Deadly Dig*?”

You write for long enough, you stop expecting anyone in your life to actually keep up with what you’re producing. My mom only got through book five of the Petal Bloom Mysteries, *A Murderous Mishap*.

Matt, my ex, never read any of them other than the first one. It had really never occurred to me that Chess would even keep track of the titles, much less read them.

But that’s the magic of Chess. Just when you’re kind of over her shit, she does or says something genuinely kind, genuinely lovely, something that makes you feel like the sun is shining right on you.

“Of course, I did,” she says, picking the last piece of bread out of the basket. “You read mine, right?”

I have, more than once, but not for fun or because I genuinely enjoyed them. I think of lying in my bed, exhausted and nauseous, so sick and tired of being sick and tired, reading *Your Best Self* and then *You Got This!*, shame pricking hot under my skin because I was looking for shit to dislike, looking for sentences to roll my eyes at. What kind of person hate-reads their best friend’s books?

“Obviously!” I tell her now, a little too bright, but she must not notice because she just smiles at me again.

“Good. I never would’ve written them without you.”

I blink at her. It’s the first time she’s ever said anything like that, and I have no idea what she means. By the time Chess launched herself as this weird combination of Taylor Swift, Glennon Doyle, and a girl boss Jesus, we weren’t talking all that much. I was wrapped up in my own writing, and Matt, while she was taking over the world.

“Oh yeah, I was very vital to your process, hanging out here in North Carolina,” I joke, but she shakes her head.

“No, you were! You were the one who actually got me to commit to writing, you know? You always took it so seriously with your little notebooks, blocking out those ... what did you call it? You had a little timer for it.”

It’s called the Pomodoro technique, and I actually still use it, even though it’s not exactly doing me much good these days. I wave her off.

“I was just a nerd,” I tell her, and she reaches across the table to swat at my arm.

“That’s my best friend you’re talking about, bitch.”

The rest of the lunch passes by quickly, so much so that I'm actually surprised when the check comes. Chess swipes it up before I even have a chance to pretend I was going to pay, and then we're outside on the sidewalk, the late May afternoon warm and rainy.

"I've missed you, Em," she tells me, giving me another hug, and I smile against her collarbone, shrugging when I pull back.

"I'm always here," I tell her. I don't mean for it to come out quite as sad sack as it does, but it's the truth. Chess is the one who is always on the go, but I'm still here in Asheville, the same town where I grew up. We only managed this lunch because Chess had a signing at the local bookstore this weekend.

"Well, good," she tells me now, flashing me a wink. "That way I always know where to find you."