

The background of the cover is a lush, magical forest scene. Sunlight filters through the trees, creating a warm, golden glow. The air is filled with numerous small, glowing particles that resemble fireflies or magical sparks, scattered throughout the scene. The overall atmosphere is ethereal and enchanting.

THE
UNMAKING
OF JUNE
FARROW

A NOVEL

ADRIENNE
YOUNG

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
SPELLS FOR FORGETTING

The
UNMAKING
of
JUNE FARROW



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DELACORTE PRESS
NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Delacorte Press, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Young, Adrienne, author.

Title: The unmaking of June Farrow : a novel / Adrienne Young.

Description: First edition. | New York : Delacorte Press, 2023.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023020652 (print) | LCCN 2023020653 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593598672 (Hardback) | ISBN 9780593598689 (Ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Family secrets—Fiction. | LCGFT: Magic realist fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3625.O932 U56 2023 (print) | LCC PS3625.O932 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20230501

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023020652>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023020653>

Ebook ISBN 9780593598689

[randomhousebooks.com](https://www.randomhousebooks.com)

Book design by Caroline Cunningham, adapted for ebook

Title page and chapter ornament: iStock/KatyaKatya

Cover design: Cassie Gonzales

Cover photograph: Kim Kee Tae

ep_prh_6.1_145301140_c0_r1

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ONE



When Margaret Anne Farrow died in her sleep on June 10, 2023, I became the last living Farrow on earth.

The setting sun fell behind the hill that overlooked a wide expanse of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a rolling sea of soft violet peaks. Only a few of those who called the town of Jasper, North Carolina, home had gathered to bid Margaret farewell.

Put me to sleep with the fiddle at sunset, she'd said, because she'd known she was dying. We all did. We hadn't planned to say any words because she hadn't wanted that. There weren't many things that were clear, especially in those final years when Gran's mind had all but slipped away, but a burial on this hill at sunset with a fiddle playing in the wind was one of them.

The headstone was made of simple, rough-cut white marble to match those of the other Farrow women who were laid to rest only feet away. Mildred, Catharine, Esther, Fay, now Margaret. One day, my own name would stand beside them—June Farrow.

To the town of Jasper, I was first known as the Market Street Baby, words made eternal the day the *Chronicle* put them on the front page. Just before daybreak on October 2, 1989, Clarence Taylor was on his way to

open the cafe when he heard the sound of a baby's cry coming from the alley. It took only hours for the whole town to hear about the baby girl in the basket with the birthmark beneath one ear and the locket watch tucked into her blanket.

The necklace was an heirloom that had been passed down in the Farrow family for generations. The last woman to wear it around her neck was my mother, Susanna. Susanna—the only name missing from the cemetery because Gran had refused to raise a headstone over an empty grave.

There was no mistaking who the baby was when they found that locket watch. It had been almost fourteen months since my mother disappeared. There was no shortage of theories on the matter, but no real answers. Susanna had simply walked into the woods one day, her belly swollen with child, and never returned. There were those who thought she'd met a tragic end. That she was a victim of some unspeakable crime. Others believed she'd lost her way in the deep woods and was never found.

The easiest and most widely accepted explanation for my mother's strange disappearance was madness—the same affliction to befall every woman in my family for as far back as anyone could remember. We were cursed—the Farrow women.

By the time night had fallen, the sheriff was knocking on my grandmother's door, and that's where the story ended. My mother was gone. She wasn't coming back. So it was just the two of us, Gran and me.

Two finches arced across the darkening glow of the horizon, drawing my gaze up from the headstone as Malachi Rhodes drew the bow down his fiddle. The notes stretched deep and long, sending a melody into the air that made my heart twist painfully. The same tweed flat cap he wore fly-fishing on the river every morning was pulled low over his wrinkle-framed eyes, but he was one of the few in town whom Gran had considered a true friend, and he'd made the effort of wearing his nice jacket.

The windows of the little white wooden church at the bottom of the hill were still lit. On Sundays, it was filled for service, when everyone in Jasper piled into the pews. Most everyone, anyway. I'd never set foot in the place; neither had Gran. That was one of the reasons the young minister, Thomas

Falk, had pretended not to watch as we'd made our way through the cemetery gates. It was also one of the reasons that only four other souls stood on that hill besides me and Malachi.

Ida Pickney, our next-door neighbor, dabbed at the corner of her eye with the tissue balled in her fist. Her daughter, Melody, was at her side, and Mason Caldwell stood a whole head taller than her only a few feet away. He'd had the misfortune of being the only kid in grade school foolish enough to sit beside me at lunch, and he'd eventually grown into the only fool who'd jump from the river bridge with me in the summers or cut class with me our senior year. Then there was Birdie Forester, Gran's oldest friend, who was more like family than anything.

Her hand found mine, squeezing, and it was only then that I could feel how cold my fingers were. I blinked, pulling my eyes from the narrow steeple of the church to look over my shoulder. Birdie stood at my back, the lace neckline of her black dress fluttering along the curve of her collarbones. Her silver hair was pulled into old-fashioned pin curls, making her look exactly like the photographs of her and Gran when they were young. There were dozens of them in the basement. Arm in arm in front of the soda shop. Perched like chickens atop hay bales on the farm. Standing knee-deep in the river in only their underwear.

"Made it to holy ground after all," Birdie whispered.

A smile pulled at the corner of my mouth, my eyes flitting again over the five white headstones of the Farrow women. There was a time when this corner of the cemetery didn't exist. When Gran was little, the Farrow women were buried outside of the fence because they weren't baptized. But eventually, as the need for more burial plots grew and the fences of the churchyard were moved, the banished graves fell within its borders. Gran had found an endless humor in that, saying she'd make it to holy ground after all.

There were things that made this town what it was. The scent of honeysuckle blooming along the black tar roads and the rush of the Adeline River, which cut through the land like the scrape of a knife. The curious gazes that followed me and Gran on the street and the rumors that skipped in the air no matter how much time had passed. Their stories were nothing

compared to the ones that Gran had regaled me with when she tucked me into bed as a little girl. The town of Jasper had no idea just how different and strange we were.

The wind picked up, and goosebumps surfaced on my skin, tracing from my wrist to my elbow when the feeling of eyes crept up the back of my mind. I swallowed hard before I followed the movement at the corner of my vision back down the hill. The square of golden light on the lawn beside the church was painted with a sharp black shadow.

My gaze rose to see the silhouette of a man framed in the window, shoulders squared to the cemetery. Even from here I could feel those eyes focused on me. But the parking spot where the minister's car had been an hour ago was now empty. So was the church.

It's not real, I told myself, tearing my eyes away. There's nothing there.

When I blinked, he was gone.

The notes of the fiddle slowed, drawing out against the wind as the last bit of light disappeared in the distance. The trees swayed in a balmy summer evening breeze that made my skin sticky to the touch, and a moment later, there was only the sound of the footsteps on the damp grass as the others made their way through the headstones and back to the road.

I stared at the dark, crumbled earth that filled the grave. Gran had taught me how to work the farm, to weave flower crowns, and to make her grandmother's biscuits. She taught me how to ignore the whispered prayers women uttered beneath their breaths when they came in and out of the flower shop. How to read the coming seasons by the intuition of the trees and predict the weather by the look of the moon. I hadn't let myself really think about the fact that it was what came next that I most needed her for. But she wouldn't be there.

Birdie and I waited for the last of the headlights to bleed away before we finally started the walk back, following the bridge over the river to the single block that was downtown Jasper. I chanced one more look at the church and found the window still empty, like I knew it would be. But that sick feeling still swirled in my belly.

I unbuttoned the top of my black cotton dress, letting the cool night air touch my skin before I pulled off my shoes, a pair of black slingback heels Gran had probably had in her closet since 1970. The same was likely true for the pearl earrings I'd fished from her jewelry box that morning.

The crickets woke with the darkness that fell over the thin strip of town that lined the road, not a car in sight. Small communities like this one usually went to sleep with the sun, and Jasper was mostly farms, which meant its residents would be up when the roosters crowed.

The main street had some other name no one ever remembered, a combination of four or five numbers that only showed up on maps. In Jasper, it was known as just the river road, the only way to town from the remote stretches that were tucked into the surrounding mountains. South took you to Asheville. North took you to Tennessee.

A banner for the upcoming Midsummer Faire was stretched out across the only intersection, catching the wind like a sail. The redbrick-faced buildings were more than 150 years old. They snaked along the Adeline River, which, that time of night, with the moon waning, just looked like a wall of black. The only reminders that it was there were the hiss of it running over the rocks in the shallows and the distinct smell that the churn of mountain water put into the air.

The lights of the cafe, the feed store, the grocery, and the bank were dark, and the poorly marked side streets were quiet. One after the other, the tilting signs reflected the moonlight as we passed. Bard Street, Cornflower Street, Market Street...I let my eyes drift to the shadows that striped this last narrow alley. It was there that Clarence Taylor had heard those cries in the darkness and found me.

Then there was Rutherford Street, named after one of the Jasper's more sinister tales, the only one I knew of that overshadowed my mother's disappearance. Decades ago, the town's minister had been brutally murdered at the river, though I wasn't sure what truth there was to the grisly details I'd heard murmured over the years. There were people who still left flowers on his grave and his picture hung in the cafe like the patron saint of

Jasper, still watching over his flock. My missing mother, on the other hand, had barely warranted a search party.

“Did Mason lock up?” Birdie asked, eyes finding the dark windows of the flower shop across the street.

I nodded, watching our reflections on the glass as we walked side by side. Birdie had taken over running the shop when Gran got so sick she couldn’t work, and now Mason had pretty much taken over things at the farm. My days for the last year and a half had been spent looking after Gran, and now that she was gone, I wasn’t sure where I fit anymore. I wasn’t sure it would matter much longer, either.

The porch light of the little house I’d grown up in was the only one lit when we turned onto Bishop Street. Even from the outside, it looked different without my grandmother in it. Older, somehow. Birdie, on the other hand, looked younger in the moonlight. She unlatched the gate to the once-white picket fence, holding it open for me before she followed.

She’d sold her house and moved in three years ago, taking the spare room downstairs when Gran’s decline worsened, and the two of us became the three of us. But in a way, that had always been true. Even before Birdie’s husband died, she’d been a fixture, a rare constant in my life. That was one thing that wouldn’t change now that Gran was gone.

I climbed the steps to the porch and opened the screen door. For no other reason than it was habit, I reached into the letter box, tucking the little stack of envelopes under my arm. With a pang of guilt, I realized it was one of those mundane things that went on, even when your world stopped spinning. Edison’s Cafe still closed at 8 P.M., the morning glories still bloomed at dawn, and the mail was still delivered every day but Sunday.

Birdie pushed through the door, and that smell—old wood and decades’ worth of brewed coffee that had baked itself into the walls—made my throat constrict. She hung her sweater on one of the hooks, where Gran’s hand-knit scarf was still buried beneath an umbrella and a rain jacket. I suspected that the ache of missing her would mostly come from those little things. The holes that were left behind, empty places I’d stumble upon now that she was gone.

A narrow hallway stretched past the sitting room to the bottom of the stairs. The floorboards groaned, the old house creaking around us as a wind wove through the trees again. Birdie stopped in front of the long, enamel-framed mirror that hung over a little table beneath it. I set the letters down on top of the others that had accumulated there. At one corner, an oval picture frame held a photograph I'd taken of Gran sitting on the porch steps. Beside it was another that held a picture of my mother.

"Sure you don't want me to make you a cup of tea?" Birdie wrung her hands, trying her best not to appear as if she was taking care of me. I'd never liked that.

"I'm sure. I'm just going to go to bed."

"All right."

Her eyes searched the ground, and she reached out, hooking one hand on the banister as if she was steadying herself.

My brow pulled. "You okay?"

That flat line of her mouth twitched just slightly, and she hesitated before she reached into the pocket of her dress. When she pulled out what was inside, I had to squint to make it out in the dark. The glow of the kitchen light glimmered on what lay at the center of her palm.

"She wanted me to be sure you got this," she said.

An ache rose in the back of my throat. It was the locket. The one Gran had worn every day since the sheriff had knocked on her door with me in his arms. The one that had been tucked into that blanket with me when Susanna left.

The long, faceted chain glittered as I lifted it from Birdie's hand and the pendant swung into the air, cold and heavy. Its round face was etched in a complex pattern, worn from the years of my grandmother's fingers, and her grandmother's before her.

I opened the clasp and the mother-of-pearl watch face stared back up at me. It was set with not two hands, but four, and each of them varied in length. It was a strange piece of jewelry that most closely resembled a watch. But the numbers were off-kilter, some of them missing. Ten and eleven were gone, and a zero stood in place of the twelve. The hands never

moved, two of them perpetually stuck on the one, the other two pointing to nine and five. The numbers that were scratched from the mother-of-pearl surface could still be seen if I tilted it toward the light, a defect that Gran didn't know the origin of.

Birdie looked sad, brushing a thumb over my cheek before she kissed it. Her eyes searched mine for another moment before she let me go.

“Good night, honey.”

I waited for her bedroom door to close before I turned back toward the mirror. My fair hair was darker in the weak light, and it was already escaping from the bun I'd tamed my waves into. The chain of the locket slipped through my fingers as I dropped it over my head, letting the gleaming pendant come to rest between my ribs. I closed my hand over it, rubbing my thumb over the smooth surface.

I glanced at the picture of my mother nestled at the corner of the table before studying my own face in the mirror's reflection. My light brown eyes were the only thing I'd ever gotten from Susanna, and every time I thought of it, it made me feel like I was seeing a ghost. I traced the dark red birthmark tucked beneath my ear with the tip of my finger. It stretched down around my jaw, coming to a point along my throat.

When I was a child, the kids at school said it was the devil's mark, and though I'd never admitted it to anyone, I'd sometimes wondered if it was true. No one in Jasper had ever seen me as normal because my grandmother had never been normal. She'd never believed she was sick, either, saying that she was simply in two places at once.

Before I'd even registered the sting behind my eyes and the quiver of my bottom lip, a hot tear was falling down my cheek.

“I know,” I whispered, glancing to my grandmother's face in the second photograph on the table. “I promised I wouldn't cry.”

But that ache inside of me wasn't just the pain of losing her. It was the relief, too, and that was something else I'd never said aloud. In those last years, Gran had all but lived inside of her own broken mind, shut away from our world for weeks at a time. It was one thing to miss her when she was gone. It was another to miss her when she was still here, in this house

with me. For the last few months, I'd found myself longing for the end as much as I'd dreaded it.

The pop of wood made me blink, and my head turned to the hallway, where the light from the porch was coming through the front door's oval stained glass window. But the moment my eyes focused, a prick crept over my skin again, making me still. The frame of a man was visible on the other side—the same one I'd seen at the church.

There, behind the glass, eyes as black as inkblots fixed on me as the bright orange glow of a cigarette ignited in the darkness.

It's not real.

I clenched my teeth, jaw aching as I willed myself to blink. But this time, he didn't disappear. A curl of smoke twisted in the haze of the porch light, and I was sure for a moment that I could smell it.

I closed my eyes again, counting three full breaths before I opened them. The cigarette glowed again. He was still there.

My fingers slipped from the locket, and I started up the hall, heels knocking like a heartbeat until my hand found the brass knob. I yanked the door open, my vision swimming as the night air spilled back into the house. The place on the porch where the man had stood only seconds before was now empty. Finally, he'd vanished.

I pushed through the screen door, searching the darkness. The yard was quiet, the rocking chair still as the tin light swayed gently overhead.

"Everything okay, June?"

Ida Pickney's high-pitched voice made me jump, and I sucked in a breath. She stood on the porch of the house next door, already changed out of the dress I'd seen her wearing at the burial. An unopened newspaper was clutched in one hand as her eyes moved over me slowly.

"Fine." I forced a smile, trying to slow my breathing.

Ida hesitated, hands fidgeting with the rubber band on the paper. "Can I get you anything, dear?"

"No, I just..." I shook my head. "I just thought I saw someone on the porch."

The look on her face went from hopeful to worried in an instant, and I realized my mistake. That was how it had started for Gran—seeing things that weren't there.

I pressed my hand to my forehead, giving a nervous laugh. "It was nothing."

"All right." She forced a smile. "Well, you just call over if you or Birdie need anything at all. You will, won't you?"

"Of course. Night, Ida."

I slipped back inside before she'd even answered, locking the dead bolt behind me. My steps were slower as I made my way back toward the stairs, but my palms were slick, my unraveling hair curling with damp. When I reached the mirror, the locket caught the light, and I saw that the trail of the tear that had fallen a moment ago still striped my cheek. I wiped it with the back of my hand.

"It's not real." The words were barely audible under my shaky breath. "There's nothing there."

I ignored the sick, sinking feeling in my gut again. The one that whispered at the back of my mind the thought that I wouldn't let fully come to the surface. A year ago, I would have told myself it was just a trick of the light through the glass. Not a wrinkle of the mind. Not a fine crack in the ice. It was the porch light swinging. The shadow of a tree branch.

But I knew. I'd known for some time now.

My eyes trailed down the dark hallway, to Birdie's bedroom door. I hadn't told her about the flashes of light that had begun to appear at the corner of my vision last summer. I hadn't told her about the echo of voices that drifted in the air around me or the fact that more and more each day, my thoughts felt like sand seeping through the floorboards.

It came for my grandmother, as it came for my mother, and now it had come for me.

For years, the town of Jasper had been watching me, waiting for the madness to show itself. They didn't know it was already there, brimming beneath the surface.

My future had never been a mystery. I'd known since I was very young what lay ahead, my own end always so sharply visible in the distance. That was why I'd never fall in love. Why I'd never have a child. Why I'd never seen any point in the dreams that lit the eyes of everyone else around me. I had only one ambition in my simply built life, and that was to be sure the Farrow curse would end with me.

It was as good a place as any to end a story. I wasn't the first Farrow, but I would be the last.