



“An irresistible, un-put-downable page-turner.”  
—Nathan Englander

# Cleopatra and Frankenstein

*a novel*

# Coco Mellors

BLOOMSBURY

### Praise for *Cleopatra and Frankenstein*

“An irresistible, un-put-downable, page-turner of a novel. A love letter to New York, a love letter to love, *Cleopatra and Frankenstein* is a complex, funny, deeply-felt, beautifully written debut.” —Nathan Englander, author of *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank* and *kaddish.com*

“Coco Mellors writes about today’s Bright Young Things as they stumble through marriages, affairs, artistic quandaries and addictive temptations. She is a strong writer of wit and sophistication who creates with assurance a jangling world where friendships both matter and falter, and where how to love remains the deepest preoccupation of all.” —Susan Minot, author of *Monkeys, Evenings, Thirty Girls* and *Why I Don’t Write*

“*Cleopatra and Frankenstein*, the luminous debut novel from Coco Mellors, is a book about many things: it’s a great, swooning love story, a shattering depiction of how addiction and mental illness warp our lives, and a perceptive, witty portrait of globalized New York. But most of all, Mellors has written a devastatingly human book, at turns sharp and tender, that marks her as the rare writer whose sentences are as beautiful as they are wise. An unforgettable read.” —Sam Lansky, author of *The Gilded Razor* and *Broken People*

“Every sentence of Coco Mellors’ debut novel *Cleopatra and Frankenstein* shimmers with wit and wisdom. Masterfully told through multiple voices, *Cleopatra and Frankenstein* offers an intimate glimpse of a marriage marred by alcoholism and mental illness. Mellors’ real genius lies in her ability to render the pervasive damage wrought by those suffering from addiction, trauma, and mental illness with enough compassion that readers will find themselves rooting for each of the characters, firmly invested in their ability to wrest recovery and hope from the wreckage. Mellors’ brilliantly crafted story and unforgettable characters offer unvarnished insight into the very heart of what it means to be human. I will be pressing this book into all my friends’ hands.” —Christie Tate, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Group*

“I was in the thrall of this ambitious, surprising novel from the very first page. With razor-sharp dialogue, a keen eye for detail, and a cast of unforgettable characters, *Cleopatra and Frankenstein* untangles the mess of hope and heartache that love too often leaves in its wake. It’s an astounding debut by a wise, assured writer. I can’t wait to see what Coco Mellors conjures up next.”  
—Grant Ginder, author of *The People We Hate at the Wedding*

“A character-driven epic thoroughly engrossing and entirely magnificent. It is thrilling to read a book that articulates with nuance and compassion the way gender impacts every part of our lives. Sometimes you can just tell that a debut novel has been percolating and perfecting inside an author’s mind until it is ready to leap into—and ultimately change—the world.” —Adam Eli, author of *The New Queer Conscience*

“A heart-stopping, page-turning, romantic saga rendered with uncommon depth and nuance. Mellors has created a couple that feels achingly real; the passionate fire that fuels their marriage is the same blaze that threatens to burn it to the ground. But the book smartly expands its lens beyond just husband and wife, and examines how one relationship can have a global impact on an entire network of loved ones. *Cleopatra and Frankenstein* will ensnare you with its irresistible wit, surprise you with its powerful insight, and enthrall you with its kaleidoscopic portrait of one great love affair.” —Jonathan Parks-Ramage, author of *Yes, Daddy*

# **Cleopatra and Frankenstein**



*For my mother, who believed*

# **Cleopatra and Frankenstein**

*a novel*

**Coco Mellors**

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G  
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY





## CONTENTS

Chapter One	December
Chapter Two	June
Chapter Three	July
Chapter Four	Early August
Chapter Five	Late August
Chapter Six	Early September
Chapter Seven	Late September
Chapter Eight	October
Chapter Nine	January
Chapter Ten	February
Chapter Eleven	Early March
Chapter Twelve	Still March
Chapter Thirteen	Late March
Chapter Fourteen	April
Chapter Fifteen	May
Chapter Sixteen	August
Chapter Seventeen	January
Acknowledgments	
A Note on the Author	

*Halve me like a walnut  
Pry the part of me that is hollow  
From the part that yields fruit.*

—OMOTARA JAMES

*Let's be hungry a little while longer.  
Let's not hurt each other if we can.*

—MAYA C. POPA

## CHAPTER ONE

# December

She was already inside the elevator when he entered. He nodded at her and turned to pull the iron gate shut with a clang. They were in a converted factory building in Tribeca, the kind still serviced, unusually, by freight elevators. It was just the two of them, side by side, facing forward as the mechanism groaned into motion. Beyond the metal crisscross of the gate, they watched the cement walls of the building slide by.

“What are you getting?” He addressed this to the air in front of him, without turning toward her.

“I’m sorry?”

“I’ve been sent for ice,” he said. “What do you need?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m off home.”

“At ten thirty on New Year’s Eve? That is either the saddest or the wisest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Let’s indulge me and say wisest,” she said.

He laughed generously, though she didn’t feel she’d been particularly witty. “British?” he asked.

“London.”

“Your voice sounds like how biting into a Granny Smith apple feels.”

Now she laughed, with less abandon. “How does that feel?”

“In a word? Crisp.”

“As opposed to biting into a Pink Lady or a Golden Delicious?”

“You know your apples.” He gave her a respectful nod. “But it’s insanity to suggest you sound anything like a Golden Delicious. That’s a midwestern accent.”

They reached the ground floor with a soft thud. He cranked the door open for her to pass.

“You are an odd man,” she said over her shoulder.

“Undeniably.” He ran ahead to open the building door. “Accompany this odd man to the deli? I just need to hear you say a few more words.”

“Mm, like what?”

“Like aluminum.”

“You mean aluminium?”

“Ah, there it is!” He cupped his ears in pleasure. “That extra syllable. A-luh-mi-nee-uhm. It undoes me.”

She tried to look skeptical, but she was amused, he could tell.

“You’re easily undone,” she said.

He surprised her by stopping to consider this with genuine earnestness.

“No,” he said eventually. “I’m not.”

They were on the street. Across from them a store selling neon signs bathed the sidewalk in splashes of yellow, pink, and blue. MILLER LITE. LIVE NUDES. WE WILL DYE FOR YOU.

“Where is it?” she asked. “I could use some more cigarettes.”

“About two blocks that way.” He pointed east. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-four. Old enough to smoke, if you were thinking of telling me not to.”

“You are the perfect age to smoke,” he said. “Time stored up to solve and satisfy. Is that how the Larkin poem goes?”

“Oh, don’t quote poetry. You might accidentally undo *me*.”

“ ‘I sing the body electric!’” he cried. “ ‘The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them!’”

“Sha-la-la! I shan’t listen to you!”

She pressed her palms to her ears and sprinted ahead of him up the street. A car blasting a jubilant pop song shot by. He caught up with her at the light, and tentatively, she released her hands from her head. She was wearing pink leather kid gloves. Her cheeks were pink, too.

“Don’t worry, that’s all I remember,” he said. “You’re safe.”

“I’m impressed you remember any at all.”

“I’m older than you. My generation had to memorize these things in school.”

“How old?”

“Older. What’s your name?”

“Cleo,” said Cleo.

He nodded.

“Appropriate.”

“How so?”

“Cleopatra, the original undoer of men.”

“But I’m just Cleo. What’s your name?”

“Frank,” said Frank.

“Short for?”

“Short for nothing. What on earth would Frank be short for?”

“I don’t know.” Cleo smiled. “Frankfurter, frankincense, Frankenstein ...”

“Frankenstein sounds about right. Creator of monsters.”

“You make monsters?”

“Sort of,” said Frank. “I make ads.”

“I was sure you were a writer,” she said.

“Why?”

“Crisp,” said Cleo, raising an eyebrow.

“I started an agency,” said Frank. “We’re where the people who don’t make it as writers go.”

They walked until they found the twenty-four-hour bodega glowing on the corner, flanked by buckets of heavy-headed roses and frothy carnations. Frank pulled the door open for her with a jingle. In the bright fluorescence of the shop’s interior they looked at each other openly for the first time.

Frank was, she estimated, in his late thirties or early forties. Kind eyes, was her first thought. They crinkled automatically as they met hers. Long, feathery lashes that brushed against his spectacle lenses, lending his angular face a surprising softness. Curly dark hair, spry as lamb’s wool, thinning a little on the top. Now, sensing her eyes on this, he ran a hand through his hair self-consciously. The skin on the back of his hand and face was freckled, still tanned despite the winter. It matched his tan cashmere scarf, tucked into a well-tailored topcoat. He had the slight, energetic build of a retired dancer, a body that suggested economy and intelligence. Cleo smiled approvingly.

He smiled back. Like most people, he noticed her hair first. It hung over her shoulder in two golden curtains, sweeping open to reveal that much-anticipated first act: her face. And it was a performance, her face. He felt instinctively that he could watch it for hours. She’d drawn thick black wings over her eyelids,

1960s style, finishing each flick with a tiny gold star. Her cheeks were dusted with something shimmering and gold too; it sparkled like champagne in the light. A heavy sheepskin coat encased her, paired with the pink kid gloves he'd noticed earlier and a white woolen beret. On her feet were embroidered cream cowboy boots. Everything about her was deliberate. Frank, who had spent much of his life surrounded by beautiful people, had never met anyone who looked like her.

Embarrassed by the directness of his stare, Cleo turned to examine a shelf filled, inopportunistically, with cans of cat food. She was wearing too much makeup, she worried, and looked clownish in the light.

"My brother," said Frank to the man behind the counter. "Happy New Year."

The man looked up from his newspaper, where he was reading about more government-sanctioned tortures in his country. He wondered what made this white man think they were brothers, then smiled.

"And to you," he said.

"Where's the ice?"

"No ice." He shrugged.

"What kind of deli doesn't sell ice?"

"This one," said the man.

Frank lifted his hands in surrender.

"Okay, no ice." He turned to Cleo. "You want your smokes?"

Cleo had been scanning the cigarette prices on the shelf. She pulled out her wallet, which, Frank noted, was not really a wallet at all but a velvet pouch stuffed with papers and wrappers. Her long fingers haltingly picked through its contents.

"You know what?" she said. "I have a few rolling papers in here. I'll just get a bag of tobacco. A small one. How much is that?"

Frank watched the man's whole posture relax forward as she addressed him. It was like watching the front of an ice glacier dissolve into the sea; he melted.

"Beautiful girl," he murmured. "How much you want to pay?"

A red blush was rising up her neck to her chin.

"Let me get this," said Frank, slapping down his credit card. "And—" He picked up a bar of milk chocolate. "This too. In case you get hungry."

Cleo gave him a grateful look, but she did not hesitate.

“Pack of Capris please,” she said. “The magenta ones.”

Back outside, Cleo scanned up and down the street.

“You’ll never get a cab tonight,” Frank said. “Where do you live?”

“East Village,” she said. “Near Tompkins Square Park. But I’ll just walk, it’s not too far.”

“I’ll walk with you,” he said.

“No, you mustn’t,” she protested. “It’s too far.”

“I thought it wasn’t far?”

“You’ll miss the countdown.”

“Fuck the countdown,” said Frank.

“And the ice?”

“You’re right. The ice is important.”

Cleo’s face fell. Frank laughed. He began marching north, so she had no choice but to follow him. He looked over to find her trotting along beside him and slowed down.

“Are you warm enough?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “Are you? Would you like my chapeau?”

“Your what?”

“My hat. He’s a beret, so I usually speak to him in French.”

“You speak French?”

“Only a little. I can say, like, ‘Chocolat chaud avec chantilly’ and ‘C’est cool mais c’est fou.’ ”

“What does that mean?”

“ ‘Hot chocolate with whipped cream’ and ‘It’s cool but it’s crazy.’ Both surprisingly useful phrases. So, do you want him?”

“I don’t think I was built to pull off a beret.”

“Nonsense,” said Cleo. “The world is your chapeau.”

“You know what?” Frank plucked the hat from Cleo’s head and pulled it gamely over his own. “You’re right.”

“Magnifique,” she said. “Allez!”

They walked east toward Chinatown. A group of women all wearing silver top hats and novelty 2007 sunglasses wobbled past them. One blew a party horn by Frank’s head, and the group exploded into whoops of delight. He pulled the beret back off his head.

“Would it be un-festive of me to say I hate New Year’s?” he asked.

Cleo shrugged. “I usually only celebrate Lunar New Year.”

Frank waited, but she didn't elaborate.

"So, what was the best part of last year for you?" he asked.

"Just one thing?"

"It can be anything."

"Gosh, let me think. Well, I switched to an antidepressant that actually allows me to achieve orgasm again. That felt like a win."

"Wow. Okay. I was not expecting that. That's great news."

"Both clitoral and penetrative." Cleo gave him two thumbs. "What about you? What was your favorite thing that happened last year?"

"God, nothing that can compare to that."

"It doesn't have to be that personal! Sorry, mine was weird. I'm embarrassed."

"Yours was great! That's a big deal. I just treat my misery the old-fashioned way, with large doses of alcohol and repression."

"How's that working for you?"

Frank mimicked her two thumbs up and kept walking.

"Anyway, I think it's really impressive that you're taking care of yourself," he said.

Another group of revelers had broken between them, drowning out this last statement. He clambered around them to return to her side, repeating himself.

"That's a kind thing to say. I just have a lot of ..." She waved vaguely toward a pile of trash spilling onto the sidewalk next to them. "Stuff in my family. I have to be careful." She cleared her throat. "Anyway. Tell me about your year."

"Best moment from last year? Probably just work things. I won an award for an ad I directed. That felt really good."

"How wonderful! Which award?"

"It's called a Cannes Lion. They're kind of a big deal in my industry. It's stupid, really."

"No, it's not. I'd love to win an award for something."

"You will," he said confidently.

They passed two men, ostensibly strangers, peeing against a wall in comfortable silence. Frank offered Cleo his hand as she hopped over the twin streams of urine. She shook her head.

"Men!"



Her hand lingered in his, and then she pulled it away to rummage in her bag.

“So,” he said. “Do you have someone in particular you’re, um, having these orgasms with?”

Frank was straining for the tone of “curious friend,” but worried he’d ended up more “concerned sexual health clinic counselor.”

“Both clitoral *and* vaginal?” Cleo teased.

Frank cleared his throat.

“Yes ... those.”

Cleo gave him a sly, sidelong glance.

“Just myself right now.”

His face cracked involuntarily into a grin. She laughed.

“Oh, you like that thought, do you? What about you? Isn’t everyone your age supposed to be married?”

“No, they changed that law,” said Frank. “It’s optional now.”

“Thank god,” said Cleo and lit a cigarette.

They wound their way north to Broome Street, past storefronts selling houseplants and psychic readings, chandeliers and industrial-size kitchen mixers. They talked about New Year’s resolutions and what’s in an old-fashioned and who they’d known at the party (Cleo: one person; Frank: everyone). They talked about the host of the party, a celebrated Peruvian chef named Santiago, who Frank had known for twenty years. Cleo’s roommate was a hostess at Santiago’s restaurant, which was how she’d been invited, though that roommate had absconded with an Icelandic performance artist soon after she arrived. They talked about Pina Bausch and Kara Walker and Paul Arden and Stevie Nicks and James Baldwin.

“There’s this collection of essays I love by the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist,” said Cleo. “It’s called *Sharp Tongues, Loose Lips, Open Eyes* ... I can’t remember the rest.”

“A man of few words.”

“Oh, have you read him?”

“No, it’s just, that title is—never mind. I keep meaning to read more,” he conceded.

Cleo shrugged. “Just buy a book and read it.”

“Right. I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Anyway, in one of the essays he talks about being able to tell how giving a person is as a lover by how curious they are. You’re meant to actually *count* in your head how many questions they ask you in a minute. If they ask four or more, then they like to please.”

“And if they ask none?”

“Then you can pretty much assume they don’t eat pussy. Or, you know, dick, if that’s your bag.”

“Pussy,” said Frank quickly. “Is my bag.”

She gave him another of her amused looks.

“I sort of figured.”

“And you?”

“My bag? Dick.” She laughed, then tilted her head to consider this further. “Maybe with a side bag of pussy. But just a small one. Like one of those little clutches you wear to the opera.”

Frank nodded. “An evening purse of pussy.”

“Exactly. As opposed to, like, a duffel bag of dick.”

“A portmanteau of penis.”

“A carry-all of cock.”

“A backpack of boners.”

Cleo’s face lit up with laughter, and then she burrowed it into her hands as though snuffing out a match.

“God, I sound carnivorous. Let’s change the subject, please.”

“So ...” Frank took a deep breath. “What do you do? Where are you from? When did you move to New York? Do you have brothers and sisters? When’s your birthday? What’s your horoscope? Birthstone? Shoe size?”

Cleo exhaled another peal of laughter. Frank grinned.

“Go on then,” he said. “Where are you from?”

“You really want to know all that about me?”

“I want to know everything about you,” he said, and was surprised to find he meant it.

Cleo told him that she’d moved around a lot growing up, but her family eventually settled in South London. Her parents split up when she was a teenager, and her father, an affable but distant engineer, quickly remarried and adopted his new wife’s son. Her mother died in Cleo’s last year of university at Central Saint Martins. She still had not found a way to talk about it. She had no

close family back home, which left her feeling untethered but also, she added quickly, completely free.

With nothing tying her to London and a small inheritance from her mother that could cover a flight and two years of cheap rent, she'd applied for a scholarship to study painting at a graduate program in New York. She arrived when she was twenty-one. For her, that MFA meant two years in a smooth orbit from her bed, to a canvas, to bars, to other people's beds, and back to a canvas. She'd graduated the previous spring and had been freelancing as a textile designer for a fashion brand ever since. The pay wasn't great, and they didn't provide benefits, but it gave her enough money and free time to rent a sizable room in the East Village, which she also used as her painting studio. Her biggest fear now was that her student visa was up at the beginning of the summer, and she had no plan for what to do next.

"Do you paint every day?" asked Frank.

"Everyone always asks that. I try to. But it's hard."

"Why?"

"Sometimes the process is like ... Okay, you know when you're tidying up a cupboard—"

"Is that a closet?"

"Yes, you American, a closet. First, you have to pull everything out of it, and there's this moment when you're looking around and it's a total mess. And you feel like, *Shit*, why did I even start this? It's worse than before I began. And then slowly, piece by piece, you put it all away. But before you can create order, you have to make a mess."

"I'm following."

"That's what painting is like for me. Inevitably, there's a moment when I've pulled everything out of me, and it's just ... it's chaos on canvas. I feel like I should never have started. But then I keep going, and somehow things find their order. I know when I've finished because I feel ... I feel this *click* that means everything's in its place. It's all where it should be. Total peace."

"How long does that last?"

"Maybe seven-point-five seconds. And then I start thinking about the next piece."

"Sounds exhausting," said Frank.

"But those seven-point-five seconds are ..."

She looked up at the sky dramatically. Frank waited.

“As you would say, they undo me,” she said.

They passed a man wearing a tuxedo and a green feather boa, retching over a fire hydrant.

“I think feather boas should make a comeback,” said Cleo.

“I think you are an exceptional person,” said Frank.

“You don’t know me well enough to say that,” said Cleo, clearly delighted.

“I’m a good judge of these things.”

“Then I’ll just have to take your word for it.”

They were in Little Italy, where the streets were lined with seemingly identical Italian restaurants with red-checkered tablecloths and plastic bowls of pasta stuck in the windows. Above their heads, strings of red, white, and green bulbs dropped lozenges of light onto the street below. In a third-floor apartment window, a group of people stood smoking out a window, their bodies silhouetted against the yellow light of the room behind them. “Happy New Year!” they shouted to no one in particular. Cleo and Frank passed a quiet pizza spot on the corner, where a lone man was stacking up plastic chairs for the night.

“You want to get a slice?” asked Frank.

Cleo fingered the tassels on her bag. “I don’t have any cash.”

“I’ll buy you something,” he said.

“Drop the *something*,” she said lightly. “And you have the truth of the matter.”

“You think I’m trying to buy *you*?”

“Aren’t all men trying to buy women, deep down?”

“You really believe that?”

“I don’t *not* believe it.”

“That’s incredibly unfair.”

“Okay, tell me why I’m wrong.”

He turned to face her and exhaled slowly. He really had just wanted to get a slice.

“I think men are taught to buy things for women, yes. Not because we want to own you or control you, but because it’s a way to show we’re interested or we care that doesn’t require much, I don’t know, vulnerability. We’re not taught to communicate the way you are. We’re given these very limited, primitive tools to express ourselves, and, yes, buying a fucking meal is one of them. But women also *expect* that from us—”

Cleo was hopping up and down in excitement to interrupt him, but he raised his hand, determined to finish. “It goes both ways. You say I’m trying to buy you, but you’d be offended if I didn’t offer to pay.”

“I would not!” she exploded. “And the only reason I’m going to *let* you pay is because I happen to be triple extra-broke right now.”

“So now I *am* paying? See, that’s where I call bullshit. You want it both ways. You want to be so principled and above it all, but as soon as that becomes inconvenient for you, you’re fine with a man picking up the bill.”

“Are you *kidding* me? Maybe I’m broke because of, I don’t know, the gender pay gap, or years of systemic sexism limiting my job opportunities, or the fact I had to quit my last job as a nanny because the dad wouldn’t stop hitting on me, or—”

Now it was Frank’s turn to hop.

“That’s not why you’re broke! You’re broke because you’re twenty-four and an artist who works part-time! You can’t blame all your problems on being a woman!”

Cleo put her face close to Frank’s and spoke so quietly her words were just above a breath. He had the insane hope she was about to kiss him.

“Yes, I can,” she said.

Frank turned and walked into the pizza shop. “You’re cool,” he said over his shoulder. “But you’re crazy.”

“Sounds better in French!” she shouted back.

Cleo lit another cigarette and stamped her feet against the sidewalk like a restless racehorse. She thought about leaving just to spite him, but she knew she would regret it instantly. There was nothing to do but stand and smoke. Frank ordered two slices of pizza, anxiously checking over his shoulder to make sure she was still outside. He’d already decided that if she left, he’d run after her and apologize. But the back of her blond head was still in view, surrounded now by a cloud of smoke.

Back outside, he handed her a slice. An amber stream of oil ran across the flimsy paper plate.

“Here,” he said. “To make up for the years of systemic sexism.”

“Wanker,” said Cleo and took a bite.

“You’re in America now,” Frank said. “Here, I’m just an asshole.”

They walked with their slices up Elizabeth Street. Ahead of them a couple stood outside a bar in a pool of lamplight, performing a timeless two-person

drama. The woman was clutching her heels to her chest and crying in long, high wails while her boyfriend shook her shoulders, repeating, “Tiffany listen, listen Tiffany, Tiffany listen ...”

“I hate to say this,” whispered Frank as they passed. “But I don’t think Tiffany’s listening.”

Cleo turned back to look at them. “You think they’re all right?”

“They’ll be fine. New Year’s Eve is prime fighting night for couples. It’s like fireworks and fights. The two staples of a good New Year’s.”

“Did we just have our first fight?” Cleo asked.

Frank handed her a napkin. “I don’t know,” he said. “You did keep your shoes on.”

Cleo chuckled. “Would take a lot more than that to get me out of my cowboy boots.” She screwed up her napkin and flicked it expertly into a trash can on the corner. “Fighting can be a good thing, anyway. Look at Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. They got divorced, got back together, split up again ...”

“But did you ever think that they created their art in spite of the fighting, not because of it?”

“Who cares?” said Cleo between mouthfuls of dough. “Point is, they made it.”

Frank nodded vaguely. He took her paper plate from her and folded it into a neat square with his own. He hoped they’d pass a place to recycle soon.

“I’m dying to go to their house in Mexico City,” said Cleo.

“It’s packed with lines of tourists,” said Frank. “And Do Not Touch signs on every surface.”

“Bummer.” Cleo looked disheartened.

“But it’s still worth seeing,” added Frank quickly. “There’s this framed collection of butterflies hanging above Kahlo’s bed that Patti Smith wrote a poem about when she visited it. And all her clothes, of course. She had amazing style, kind of like you.”

Cleo smiled happily at the compliment. “Those, I would love to see.”

“Let’s go next week,” said Frank. “The whole city’s full of art. It’s the perfect place for you.”

“Next week? Just like that?”

“Sure. Why not? I closed the office, and I’ve got thousands of air miles I need to use.”

“Okay.” She laughed. “I’m in.” She shook out her hair. “Mexico fucking City!”

Frank, who had been planning to work all next week in the empty office, had never been much of a spontaneous traveler—but he liked the idea that he could be. He had the means, just not the incentive. And here was Cleo with the opposite. They both turned to each other at the same time. He hesitated, then pulled her in for a hug. Her hair smelled like soap and almonds and cigarettes. His chest smelled of damp wool and an expensive cologne she recognized, tobacco sweetened with vanilla.

“And I’m not trying to buy you,” he added, releasing her. “I’d just like to see it with you.”

“I know,” she said. “I’d like to see it with you too.”

They crossed the Bowery and wandered through the East Village, where the merriment on the street took on a subtle edge of aggression. People shouted outside bars and fell in and out of doorways. More couples fought on more street corners. At the entrance of the park, a group of crust punks, dressed in shabby military gear and studded leather jackets, gently waved sparklers above their matted heads. A pit bull wearing a neckerchief with the anarchy symbol drawn on it glanced up from the pillow of his paws to watch the sparks fall in mute wonder.

They arrived at a crumbling walk-up on St. Mark’s. The smoked glass of the front door was scrawled with incomprehensible graffiti. Frank wondered, not for the first time, what mark these anonymous scribblers thought they were making. Cleo turned to him, shy again.

“Do you want to sit in my lobby with me?”

“Why your lobby?”

Cleo hid her face in her hands.

“It’s nicer than my flat?” she said from between her fingers.

She slid her keys into the door and beckoned him in. Frank didn’t feel it was polite to point out that her lobby was just a stairwell. Cleo sat on the scuffed linoleum steps and lit a cigarette.

“You smoke in here?”

She shrugged.

“Everyone does.”

He watched her exhale twin streams of smoke from her nostrils. “I can’t believe I didn’t notice you at Santiago’s,” he said.

“I came late. I ... It’s stupid, but I couldn’t decide what to wear. It’s a kind of social anxiety, I think. If I’m nervous about going to something, I change like a hundred times. It gets later and later, which of course only makes me more anxious. Usually, I end up hyperventilating over a pile of clothes on my floor. It sounds silly, but it’s actually quite terrible.”

Frank nodded sympathetically. “So what did you end up wearing?”

“Tonight? Oh, just this thing I made.”

“Can I see?”

Cleo raised an eyebrow. She pressed the cigarette between her lips and stood to unbutton the wooden toggles of her sheepskin. What she was wearing was not so much a dress as a net made of shimmering gold threads. It was woven just loosely enough to give a suggestion of the body within. He could see, very faintly beneath the shining lattice, the outline of her nipples and belly button. She was like a smooth, lithe fish caught in a glistening net.

“Let me come upstairs,” he said.

“No,” she said, sitting back down. “My roommates might be home. And”—she exhaled smoke seriously—“we’ll have sex.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I’m leaving in a few months.”

“I think we can finish before then.”

Cleo suppressed a smile. “I just don’t want to attach,” she said.

She looked down between her knees. Frank crouched in front of her. “I’m afraid it might be too late for that.”

“You think?”

“I attached the moment I heard you say aluminum.”

Cleo looked up at him from beneath her winged eyelids.

“Al-um-in-ium,” she said softly.

Frank clutched his heart. “See? I’m screwed.”

“No, *I*’m screwed,” she said. “I’m the one who has to leave.”

“Where will you go?”

“I don’t know. I heard Bali’s cool.”

She did not feel as casual about this as she sounded.

“Not back home to England?”

“England’s not my home.”

Cleo ground her cigarette out on the metal stair tread. He sensed there was more to the story there, but he didn’t pry. She checked her watch to avoid



further questioning.

“It’s past midnight!”

“This isn’t right,” said Frank.

“Seriously,” she said. “We’ve been talking for like—”

“No, I mean, *this*. New Year’s Eve isn’t meant to be this good.”

“It’s meant to be bad?”

“It’s meant to be fine. You know? Just *fine*. It has never, not once in my life, exceeded my expectations.”

“You know, in Denmark they jump off a chair to signify jumping into the new year.”

“Are you Scandinavian?”

“Why? Because I’m blond?” Cleo rolled her eyes. “No, Frank. I just know some things.”

“That you do.” Frank stood up and dusted off his pant legs theatrically. “Okay, let’s do it.”

“Jump? But we don’t have a chair.”

“A stair is as good as a chair.”

Cleo looked up at the stairwell behind them.

“But let’s go all the way from the top,” she said. “Start the year with a bang.”

They climbed to the first landing. They had to clear roughly ten steps to land on the ground floor below. It was the kind of game children played, daring themselves to climb higher and higher. He took her hand. She squeezed it back. They both jumped.