

Deep cats

HOLLY BRICKLEY



A NOVEL

[1] SARA SMILE [2] SOMEBODY SAID [3] THE KING OF CARROT FLOWERS PT. ONE [4] FIGHT THE POWER [5] TOTAL HATE '95
[6] FUNNY STRANGE [7] WEIRD DIVIDE [8] JUST LIKE A WOMAN [9] NEVER IS A PROMISE [10] AFTER THE GOLD RUSH
[11] LET DOWN [12] BAG LADY [13] NYC [14] BAY WINDOW [15] A CASE OF YOU [16] BRING IT ON HOME TO ME
[17] HEY YA! [18] YOU SAID SOMETHING [19] THE HEART OF THE MATTER [20] RUNNING UP THAT HILL
[21] THIS SIDE OF THE BLUE [22] MIS-SHAPES [23] EVERYBODY NEEDS SOMEBODY TO LOVE [24] BRITPOP NIGHT
[25] THE WEAKNESS IN ME [26] LEAST WORST NIGHT OF THE CENTURY SO FAR [27] WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU'RE
THE ONE [28] SOMEONE GREAT [29] COMFY IN NAUTICA [30] HEARTBEATS [31] THE GIRL IN THE BRIDGE

COPYRIGHT 2025 / ALL RIGHTS RESERVED



DEEP CUTS

A Novel

Holly Brickley



CROWN
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical and public figures, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical figures and public figures appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2025 by Holly Brickley

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture.

Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader. Please note that no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems.

Published in the United States by Crown, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

crownpublishing.com

CROWN and the Crown colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Brickley, Holly, author.

Title: Deep cuts : a novel / Holly Brickley.

Description: First edition. | New York City : Crown, 2025.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024008156 | ISBN 9780593799086 (hardcover ; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780593799093 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Romance fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3602.R531255 D44 2025 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20240515

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024008156>

Hardcover ISBN 9780593799086

International edition ISBN 9798217086238

Barnes and Noble edition ISBN 9798217087785

Ebook ISBN 9780593799093

Editor: Amy Einhorn

Associate editor: Lori Kusatzky

Production editor: Abby Oladipo
Print text designer: Amani Shakrah, adapted for ebook
Print production managers: Phil Leung and Heather Williamson
Managing editor: Chris Tanigawa
Copy editor: Nancy Tan
Proofreaders: Maureen Clark, Tricia Wygal, and Emily Moore
Publicists: Dyana Messina and Stacey Stein
Marketers: Julie Cepler and Rachel Rodriguez

ep_prh_7.1a_150443872_c0_r1

Contents

Dedication

Sara Smile

Somebody Said

The King of Carrot Flowers Pt. One

Fight the Power

Total Hate '95

Funny Strange

Weird Divide

Just Like a Woman

Never Is a Promise

After the Gold Rush

Let Down

New York

Bag Lady

NYC

Bay Window

A Case of You

Bring It on Home to Me

Hey Ya!

You Said Something

The Heart of the Matter

Running Up That Hill

SF/NYC/LA/MIA

This Side of the Blue

Mis-Shapes

Everybody Needs Somebody to Love

Britpop Night

The Weakness in Me

Least Worst Night of the Century So Far

What Makes You Think You're the One

Someone Great

Comfy in Nautica

Heartbeats

The Girl in the Bridge

Discussion Questions

Acknowledgments

About the Author

For Danny

Sara Smile

He caught me singing along to some garbage song. It was the year 2000 so you can take your pick of soulless hits—probably a boy band, or a teenage girl in a crop top, or a muscular man with restricted nasal airflow. I was waiting for a drink at a bar, spaced out; I didn't realize I'd been singing until his smile floated into the periphery of my vision and I felt impaled by humiliation.

"Terrible song," I said, forcing a casual tone. "But it's an earworm."

We knew each other in that vague way you can know people in college, without ever having been introduced or had a conversation. Joey, they called him, though I decided in that moment the diminutive did not suit him; he was too tall, for one. He put an elbow on the bar and said, "Is an earworm ever terrible, though, if it's truly an earworm?"

"Yes."

"But it's doing what it set out to do," he said. "It's effective. It's catchy."

"Dick Cheney is effective," I said. "Nazis were catchy."

The grin spread again.

The bartender slid me a beer and I took it gratefully, holding the cold pint glass against my cheekbone. The song ended and a clash of bar sounds filled its void: ice shaking in tin, shuffleboard pucks clacking, a couple seated at the bar hollering in dismay at a TV suspended above the bartender's head. Joe ordered a drink and began pulling crumpled bills from his jeans pocket. I was about to

walk back to my booth when “Sara Smile” by Hall and Oates began to play, and he let out a moan.

“What a perfect song.” His hand shot into the tall dark pile of curls atop his head, then clawed its way down his cheek as he listened.

Hall and Oates! I loved Hall and Oates! They were a rare jukebox selection for the time—a band whose ‘80s sound was seen as cheesy by most people I knew, too recent to be recycled, though that wouldn’t last much longer. I leaned against the bar next to him and listened to the gorgeous, sultry first verse.

“Actually,” I said, unable to stop myself, “I would call this a perfect track, a perfect recording. Not a perfect song.” I could tell he already halfway understood but I explained anyway, with a level of detail befitting an idea of far greater complexity: “A perfect song has stronger bones. Lyrics, chords, melody. It can be played differently, produced differently, and it will almost always be great. Take ‘Both Sides, Now,’ if you’ll excuse me being that girl in a bar talking about Joni Mitchell—any singer who doesn’t completely suck can cover that song and you’ll be drowning in goosebumps, right?”

It was a leap of faith that he’d even know the song, but he gave a swift nod. “Totally.”

I ducked to avoid being swallowed by the armpit of a tall guy receiving a drink from the bartender. Joe’s eyes stayed on me, focused like spotlights, so I kept going. “Now, ‘Sara Smile’—can you imagine anyone besides Daryl Hall singing this, exactly as he sang it on this particular day?”

Joe cocked his ear. Daryl Hall responded with a long, elegant riff.

I jabbed my finger in the air, tracing the melody. “See? The most beautiful part of the verse is just him riffing. A great song—and I’m talking about the pop-rock world here, obviously—can be improved by riffing, or ruined by riffing. But it cannot *rely* on riffing.”

Joe didn’t look smug or bored, which were the reactions these kinds of tangents had historically won me. He didn’t give me a

lecture about relativism while air-quoting the phrase “good music.” He just lifted his bottle of Budweiser, paused it at his lips, and took a drink.

The tall guy beside us smacked his shoulder and Joe’s eyes lit up with recognition, so it seemed we were done. But before I could leave, he turned back. “What’s your name again?” He squinted at me rather severely, like I was a splinter he was trying to tweeze.

“Percy,” I said. “Bye.”

I walked back to the booth where my roommate and her boyfriend were planning a party I didn’t want to have. “Finally,” Megan said as I scooted in across from them on the honeywood bench. “Do you think one of those jugs of SKYY is enough? Plus mixers and a keg?” She showed me a Post-it inserted into her day planner. “That would be fifty each. Unless the mixer is Red Bull.”

Megan was an art history major but seemed happiest when doing simple math. I tolerated her orderliness by indulging in small acts of rebellion: unscrewed toothpaste lids, late phone bill payments—all calibrated to satisfy an inner urge for chaos without disrupting our friendship, which was important to me if only for its rarity, like an ugly diamond.

“I told Trent what we discussed about not inviting the whole world,” she said as she took a sip of her cosmopolitan, casting a significant look at the boyfriend. Poor Trent. I had expected them to be broken up by now.

“Is Joey Morrow coming?” Trent said to me, with one eye on Megan. When I shrugged, he pushed: “You were talking to him at the bar, right? He’s in my econ.”

Megan twisted to peer out of the booth. “Oh, him—Joey and Zoe who both like Bowie. Yeah, they’re cool.”

I knew this, that he had a girlfriend. I watched him across the bar and thought of a rom-com I’d seen at an unfortunately impressionable age in which a man says, gazing longingly at the female lead, “A girl like that is born with a boyfriend.” With Joe it

wasn't the flawless jawline, the arching eyebrows over wide-set eyes—those were offset, in the equation of attractiveness I had learned from these same movies, by the hooked nose and gapped teeth, the too-square shoulders atop a gangly-tall body. But the way he held those angular limbs, as if this jerking energy was the obvious way to make them work. The way he smiled so easily, and frowned so easily, tortured by a blue-eyed soul song. A boy like that is born with a girlfriend.

"Amoeba warning," Megan muttered, her eyes darting over my shoulder.

I felt a rush of fight-or-flight but didn't turn around. I knew she was referring to staff members of Amoeba Music, the legendary Berkeley record store where I'd worked sophomore year before switching to its inferior cousin, Rasputin Music, just up the street. Amoeba had been a hellscape of pretentious snobs and one thoroughly horrifying sexual encounter; Rasputin had been fine but boring, and nobody ever talked about the actual songs there either. Now I waitressed at a diner for twice the money and felt lucky to be free of the lot of them.

"Just the undergrads," Megan updated. "The guy with the muttonchops and two others. No Neil."

Of course. Neil would never come to a bar like this, blocks from campus, famous for accepting even the worst fake IDs. My adrenaline eased.

"Should you invite them to the party?" she asked, nostrils flaring. "You have two seconds to decide."

This stumped me—I hated them, but I could talk to them. "Okay!" I yelled, just in time for the Amoebans to pass by our booth without so much as a nod, let alone a conversation. Trent whistled a low tone that could be interpreted as either pity or mockery.

I recognized all three from behind. We hadn't been close as coworkers; they had been too focused on proving themselves to the elder statesmen of the staff, the ones with hard drug experience and

complicated living situations in Oakland. There was also an incident in which the muttonchops guy had made fun of me for not knowing the Brian Jonestown Massacre and I'd responded by accusing him of being "all breadth, no depth," a view I still held: music was a collector's habit to those guys, a sprawl of knowledge more than a well of joy. But still. A hello would've been called for.

Megan caught my eye, communicating sympathy with her face. I sent back gratitude. "Let's just get Red Bull for ourselves," I said, and she beamed.

Trent began dropping hints that the two of them should go back to his apartment, even though it was only ten and our names were on the list to play shuffleboard. At least I'd gotten out for a bit, I figured. At least I wouldn't have to keep discussing the relative merits of vodka mixers. He slid me his half-finished pint before following Megan out of the booth. It was the kind of beer that tasted like rubber bands but I drank it anyway, urgently, aware of the clock ticking on how long a girl could be alone in a bar before she became monstrously conspicuous. I feigned interest in a stained-glass lampshade hanging low over the booth.

"Name a song that's both."

Joe was standing at the foot of the booth.

I lifted the beer to hide my smile, thinking fast. "'In My Life' by the Beatles," I said. "The original cut with George Martin's weird sped-up piano solo. A perfect song with perfect bones, plus they nailed the context."

"Eh," he said, visibly disappointed by this answer. He slid onto the bench across from me. "I would argue the double-tracked vocals were a mistake."

I folded my arms and tried to play the song in my head.

"Lennon insisted on those effects because he hated his voice," he said. "But it's such an intimate song—we should feel like he's just alone, singing to us, don't you think?"

"It's not like he's got a choir behind him," I said. "It's just John, multiplied."

"Oh, like it's his multiple personalities?" He smirked. "Sounds like one of those bullshit things a music journalist would say."

I was starting to wonder if he might be right about the song, but I wanted the last word: "'Bullshit things a music journalist would say' sounds like one of those bullshit things a college boy would say."

He looked at me over the rim of his pint glass, then smiled a little as he drank. "It's still a perfect song," he said. "That's more important."

"Is it?"

We kept talking and couldn't stop. Time stretched like pulled taffy, dipping and clumping. We took turns selecting songs that the jukebox actually, miraculously, played. The overlap in our musical tastes grew wider and wider until it began to seem infinite: indie rock and Elephant 6, the entirety of the '60s, no guilt attached to pop pleasures. When we finished our drinks he disappeared for a few disorienting minutes, then returned with a teeming pitcher and two fresh glasses and we were right back in it. The booth was like its own room, enclosed on three sides by a wall and the high wooden backs of our benches. The rest of the bar—dark and murky, swimming with normal humans—we would observe occasionally, as if from a great distance.

Casually, I invited him to the party, but he said it was Zoe's dad's birthday. "Do you know Zoe?" he said, leaning over the table, his high eyebrows relaxed now.

"No." Zoe was a tasteful punk—rail thin with narrow hips, baby doll tees and platforms, bleached hair with black roots. They had arrived together that fall as a fully formed unit, transferred into our junior-year cohort from some suburban college, both poli-sci majors.

"I think—" He did a quick survey of the bar crowd before looking back at me. "I think Zoe and I might be a perfect track. We need

that context—family, friends, our hometown. I don't know about the *bones* of our relationship."

My initial response to this was guilt, as if whatever issue he had identified with his girlfriend was somehow my fault. Then I felt a stab of panic at the possibility of him being available, which I knew would turn this scenario into something I was incapable of handling. So I backpedaled: "A perfect track isn't nothing! A perfect track can be everything! 'Sara Smile' was killing you, before I started my blathering!"

He nodded, running his thumbnail over a pair of initials carved into the wooden tabletop. "True. And I can't imagine my life without her anyway, so." He patted the table conclusively.

This relieved me enough to ease the panic. I leaned back into the corner of my side of the booth; he leaned into his. I stared at the remnants of beer foam clinging to my glass and thought about his metaphor: a relationship as a perfect track. There was something delicious about it, the way he'd made my little take on a pop song so emotional, so very real-world. I nursed it like a hard candy.

The closing-time lights came on, and his face looked different in the glare—something sad and determined around the eyes, brutally alive. I felt a sudden yawning high in my chest, like a door inside me being pushed wide open.

He scooted to the edge of the bench and nodded at some guys near the door, then turned back to me. "Can I show you a song I'm working on?"

So he was an actual musician. I would spend the next few days processing this news, recasting the night's conversation in light of it, but in the moment it left me stunned. Wordlessly I wrote my address on a napkin and then he was standing, bonking his head on the hanging lampshade, buttoning a ratty navy peacoat. I stayed seated.

"Who'd you come with?" he asked.

"Oh, just some people who tolerate me," I said. "They left."

"Walk with us, then?"

"Nah," I said, then realized I needed a reason. "I don't hang out with musicians."

"And why is that?" he asked with a laugh, walking backward toward the door.

Because they make me unbearably jealous. "Because they always disappoint me," I said, which was also true.

He held the napkin up in a fist. "Challenge accepted!"

I sat in the booth until someone cleared the array of empty glasses and the stunned feeling began to mutate into anticipation. His song was certain to be either mediocre or terrible, but I relished the possibilities anyway: Whispery acoustic? Glitchy blips and bleeps? On the way home I bought a slice of pizza which I ate as I walked, grease dripping from the corners of a strangely unstoppable smile.