

Oona

Out

of

Order

Margarita Montimore

*a novel*





Oona  
Out  
of  
Order

Margarita Montimore



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*For my mother, Olla Vaisman,  
who encouraged me to dream hard  
and let me read books instead of doing chores.*

*For my husband, Terry Montimore,  
who encouraged me to write hard  
and gave me the time and space to do so.  
(Sorry about the book hoarding and messy house.)*

Time heals all. But what if time itself is the disease?

—Wim Wenders and Peter Handke, *Wings of Desire*

# Prologue

Oona stopped trusting the mirror years ago. After all, it told only a sliver of the story.

*This isn't me. I am not this woman.*

The mirror exposed time's passage, yes, but eclipsed her heart's true mileage. The lined face, the extra pounds, the hair chemically treated to hide its gray. Each year the body was hers, but her mind was out of sync with her reflection. Always playing catch-up, trying to rearrange the scrambled pieces of her life.

It was nobody's fault she had met her future too soon. It should've been decades before she wore this funeral dress.

Oona threaded the chain of her necklace through her fingers, sunlight glinting off the gold gears of the pendant's clockwork parts.

At first the lost years were agony, the instant loss unbearable. And when the stolen time was returned to her, it was rearranged. Always something else taken from her. Someone else. But life had a system of checks and balances, and the bad breaks were tempered with good fortune. Even on this bleak day, hidden delights waited to offset the sorrow. She just had to be patient, open.

For Oona, the pendulum could swing either way; next year, the face in the glass could be older or younger. It was the closest thing she could imagine to immortality, a game of existential roulette, even though the wheel would eventually stop spinning.

*I'll see them all again. Eventually. And lose them all. Again.*

She tried to accept the mirror's current verdict, to look at herself here and now. To *be* here now. But today, when her loss was tremendous and threatened to engulf her, she allowed herself to step out of this moment and rewind to a brighter one. Her muted dress replaced with sequins. Her bedroom swapped for a mirrored basement. A room brimming with music and color and light. A love like a supernova. A party like no other.

*I can still get it right.*

Someday she would pick up the thread and return to the party. Not a do-over, only a disrupted continuation. No telling when.

Someday.

*"Are you ready?"*

# PART I

## *The Party's Over*

1982: 18/18



# 1

The party flowed with cinematic choreography: plastic cups and beer bottles tilted back in a syncopated rhythm; clusters of guests bobbed heads and danced to a new wave soundtrack as if the floor were a giant trampoline, a ribbon of tipsy laughter running through the room. It might have been only a basement in Brooklyn, with mirrored walls and tan carpeting, but tonight it was their Studio 54, their Palladium, their Danceteria. A group of fifty with the noise and energy of hundreds—most on their college winter break—they'd come to celebrate New Year's Eve and Oona Lockhart's nineteenth birthday. And they showed up in style: in leather and frills, spangles and mesh, eschewing subdued fabrics for ones that glistened, glimmered, popped with color. The looks flirted with glam, goth, new wave, and punk, even as those who wore them refused to be labeled as one thing.

In the corner, Oona knelt beside the stereo, sifting through a crate of records. She paused to check her watch, an anniversary gift from her boyfriend, Dale. It had no second hand, which gave the illusion of time moving slowly, sometimes even stopping. A single black diagonal line bisected the silver face dotted with tiny black stars: 9:15 P.M. In less than three hours, it would be 1983 and she'd be a year older.

She stood, a record in either hand, as Dale—tall and sleepy-eyed, favoring his Brazilian mother's golden complexion, curly pompadour gelled back at the sides—ambled over. The sight of him quickened her breath.

"Hey, gorgeous. Whatcha got there?" He pointed at the records.

"I can't decide which one to play next. Yaz or Talk Talk?" Shoulders tight, she raised and lowered the records as if weighing them.

"I've never seen anyone look so serious about picking a record. It's adorable." He gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "How about I take over as DJ and you go dance? I'll play them both."

While she allowed him to take the records, her shoulders remained stiff. "Okay. I just need to bring down more napkins and ice—"

"I'll take care of that, too. Your only job is to enjoy the party." A wink belied his stern tone.

Suddenly, one floor up, there was a crashing thud and shatter. Everyone stopped dancing and gazed up at the ceiling. Was it a noisy intruder? Something thrown through a window? Oona and Dale rushed to the foot of the stairs.

“Stay here, I’ll see what it is,” Dale said to her.

“I’ll come with you.” Forced assertiveness as a cold dropping sensation overtook her. *Not again, please.*

He paused on the stairs, turned around. “I’m sure it’s nothing. But if it’ll make you feel better, I’ll go find Corey to check it out with me.”

“Found him.” She pointed over his shoulder.

At the top of the stairs Corey’s lanky frame was hunched over in dread, his black liberty spikes casting geometric shadows on his face. “Dude, I’m so sorry. I was showing off some dance moves for these girls and the rug got in my way. I fell on top of your coffee table and it, um, broke. Nobody’s hurt, but I’m a dumbass. I’ll clean up the mess, replace the table. Promise.” Cowering behind Corey were two petite girls wearing too much mascara and lamé dresses like liquid metal.

Dale thundered up the rest of the steps. As his chest puffed out with a slow indrawn breath, Oona crept up behind him and touched his back. Finally he sighed and said, “Hey, it’s not a real party until something breaks, right?” He stepped aside, waved through Corey and the girls. “I’ll clean it up. Just try not to break anything else.”

The contrite trio headed downstairs as Oona followed Dale to the kitchen.

He grabbed a broom and dustpan and grumbled, “The guest of honor shouldn’t be doing cleanup. I can handle the mess.”

“Let me help. I’ve barely seen you since the party started.” She pulled a trash bag from under the sink.

“I know.” Softened by her kindness, Dale dropped his voice to a sexy husk. “Good thing we saw plenty of each other earlier.”

They shared a suggestive chuckle. “I think at one point the mailman saw plenty of us, too.” She leaned in and nuzzled against his neck, breathed in his tangy scent of Drakkar Noir and Dep hair gel. “Serves us right for leaving the curtains open.”

“And still less embarrassing than your mother walking in on us last week,” said Dale.

“Oh, it got even more embarrassing after you left.” She flinched, remembering. “Once she made sure I was still taking the pill, she offered to let me borrow her copy of *The Joy of Sex*.”

“I love it.” Dale’s booming laugh forced his head back. As much as she would’ve liked to join in, she could muster only a weak smile.

Having a liberal mother had its advantages, but Oona would’ve preferred more boundaries. Her father, a banker, had provided those until she was eleven (weekly chores, study plans, limited TV time), but once he died, she’d had to set certain rules for herself. Which left her mother, a flight-attendant-turned-travel-agent, in a role more friendly than parental. She often teased Oona about taking things too seriously, whether it was her college courses or band practice, or even her relationship with Dale, urging her daughter to

be young and frivolous once in a while. As if you couldn't be serious about something and still enjoy it. As if being young meant being foolish.

"I have an idea," said Dale, dropping the broom and dustpan with a clatter. Running over the scales of her sequined dress, he teased the zipper down a few inches and murmured, "How about we go upstairs?" He kissed her exposed shoulder and walked his fingers beneath the hem of her dress, up her thigh. "We could lie under the stars..."

The "stars" he spoke of were indoors, his bedroom ceiling strung with a nest of cables and telephone wires he'd scavenged from his father's electronics store and splattered with phosphorescent paint, creating a three-dimensional cosmic effect. The first time Oona had seen that ceiling, it made her gasp in wonder; two years on, she still found it awe-inspiring. To say nothing of the man running kisses down her neck.

"Tempting, but it would be rude to the others." Reluctantly she stopped his hand from moving any farther up her leg. "With school and the band, it's been ages since I've seen anyone besides you, Corey, and Wayne."

"We saw a bunch of people at CBGB's just a couple of weeks ago."

"Yeah, but we were so busy playing the holiday showcase and meeting with Factory Twelve's manager, we barely got to talk to our friends."

"Considering what came of it, I don't think they minded. You know what a tour like this could do for our band? After opening for the Pretenders, Factory Twelve got signed to Chrysalis, and their first single just hit the Top Forty."

"They're still not the Pretenders, though. I mean, it's not like we're going to be playing stadiums."

"Right..." The word drawn out as he took a step back, his eyebrow inching up. "But we've never played for more than a couple hundred people—we've never even left the tri-state area. And Factory Twelve could still become huge. Opening for their spring tour is the kind of break most bands never see. I thought you were excited about it."

"I am. I just—I'm not..." She fought to keep a stammer out of her voice. "It's exciting, but it's intimidating. Visiting new cities, playing bigger venues..."

"It's more than that," he said with a knowing nod. "You don't have to keep it from me, you know."

Her stomach plummeted. *Did he know?* "Keep what from you?"

"You're still shaken up from the mugging after Wayne's party. I saw how you jumped at the crash earlier. You thought it was a burglar. And you're worried about touring, scared something bad might happen again."

"Oh." Relief ran through her like a faucet turned up full blast. "Well, it *was* pretty terrifying." It happened last month, on the subway back to Bensonhurst. At first she'd laughed at the man who approached them because he wore swim goggles. But she'd stopped laughing when he pulled a switchblade.

"Listen to me." Dale's voice dove down a few notes as he pulled her in close. "Nothing would've happened to you. I was ready to do whatever it took to keep you protected. Face a knife, a bullet, anything."

“Thank god all it took was handing over our money.” She shuddered, recalling how paralyzed she’d been, how Dale had to reach into her own coat pocket to remove her wallet and pass it to their goggled assailant. “And good thing I wasn’t wearing my watch that night.”

“Nothing bad will happen to you on this tour. As long as you’re with me, you’re safe.” The promise was echoed in his steady gaze and the determined set of his jaw.

“I know.” Her voice caught in her throat at his vehemence. “You don’t have to take a bullet for me to prove it.” She traced a finger over the bump in his nose.

“I’ll also take a hammer if you wanna straighten that out for me.” Despite his overall swagger, his nose was the one part of his body he felt embarrassed by.

“Shush. I have the hots for your nose. And not just because of what they say about big noses.” Oona’s hand hovered at his belt buckle, wanting to travel farther south, but remained still; it would be too easy to lose track of time. “Let’s go take care of this mess. But first, a little help?” Draping her long chestnut hair over one shoulder, she offered her exposed back so he could zip her up into the dress. “Do you think we should’ve rehearsed more earlier? I know we’re just playing for friends tonight, but I still want to impress.” After a gig, she’d once overheard someone say she was “decent, but hardly the next Joan Jett.” Oona wasn’t sure how much she agreed—given the chance, she could be a better guitarist than keyboardist, and she was as solid on vocals as Dale—but that comment stuck with her.

When she turned around and finished adjusting her dress, he gave a low whistle. “God, you’re a knockout. You have no idea.” Even beneath the harsh fluorescent kitchen light, his skin glowed as he shook his head in awe.

Pinned in place by the intensity of his dark eyes, words escaped her and narcotic elation flooded her veins. All she could do was squeeze his hand in response.

Dale moved in and spoke low into her ear. “For the record, you’re *always* impressive. I’ve been impressed by you since I first saw you. And every minute I get to spend with you is the highlight of my motherfucking life.”

★ ★ ★

In the living room, the coffee table lay in a pile of twisted chrome and glass shards.

“Fucking Corey,” Dale muttered. “And you wonder why I talk about finding a new drummer.”

As they carefully collected the mangled metal and pieces of glass, Dale continued the now-familiar refrain. “He’s getting out of control. I don’t know if he’s been doing more coke, but the drinking alone is a problem. We don’t even have a record deal and he’s already acting like Keith Moon. Maybe we should replace him now before he blows the tour for us.”

“You can’t kick him out. He messes up, but he’s a great drummer and he loves the band.” Oona smoothed his furrowed forehead. “Have more faith in him.”

Back in the basement, Dale headed over to the turntable and Oona got herself a drink. She sipped cheap champagne from a plastic cup and observed the colorful crowd before her.

Someone tapped her shoulder.

“What’s with the moping?” It was Wayne, wearing red leather head to toe, his Jheri-curl Afro shimmering in the light.

“I’m not moping.” But in her voice, a hint of defensiveness.

“Oh, come on. You’re usually dancing your ass off, smiling like a lunatic. What happened? You and Dale get into a fight?”

“Of course not. I was just thinking about how much I’ll miss everyone.” She hurried to add, “When we all go on tour.”

“I’m not really buying it, but I’ll let it go.”

Oona pointed at her empty cup. “I need a refill. Back in a sec.” She stepped away from Wayne, her mouth dry, faint queasiness undulating within her. What she really needed was a place to quiet her thoughts and set them aside, so she could get lost in the festivities.

Across from the basement stairs was the bathroom. A knock on the door yielded no response, so Oona turned the handle and stepped inside, where Corey was hunched over the sink.

“What the hell?” He bolted upright, eyes bulging.

“Oops, sor—” That was when she saw the hand mirror dusted with white powder. She closed and locked the door behind her. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“It’s not a regular thing, I swear.” A blur of his white, panicked hands waving against the orange backdrop of his jumpsuit.

“That’s what you said after you wrecked our Hoboken gig. Do you want out of the band?”

“Of course not. You think I want to wait tables at Beefsteak Charlie’s my whole life?”

“I don’t know. I *do* know Dale dropped out of college to focus on the band and convinced Wayne to do the same. I know they expect me to take a semester off from Stern to go on this tour. If you want to be part of this, you need to start taking it more seriously.” *Maybe I should take my own good advice.* She winced at her hypocrisy. “What do you think would happen if Dale or Wayne saw this?”

Anguish contorted his face as he slumped down on the lidded toilet. “You can’t tell them. The band is everything to me.”

“I know.” Oona stood over him, hands on hips. “But band policy is no hard drugs. We all agreed to it. If you can’t respect that, maybe you should get out now so they—we have time to find a new drummer before the tour.” A prickle of guilt propelled her to rip off a square of toilet paper and wipe stray powder from beneath his nose. “I’ll keep my mouth shut, but you need to get your shit together.”

“This was the last time. For real.” He went to the sink, rinsed the remaining cocaine off the hand mirror, and held it up. “See?”



Her own hazel eyes, raccooned with black liner and heavy with worry, reflected back at her. "Don't let me down." The words aimed as much at her reflection as her friend.

He rattled off more promises, gave her a grateful smile, and left.

Once she was alone, the confining space felt hot, oppressive. Maybe a brief solo respite upstairs would set her right.

She was so intent on leaving the basement unnoticed, she failed to spot a figure at the bottom of the stairs until they nearly collided. Oona stopped short, inches from knocking her oldest friend to the ground. Instead, she used the momentum to pull the shocked girl into a hug.

"Pam! I can't believe you're here. I hoped you'd show up to one of these eventually."

"Wow." She gaped at Oona and did a sweep of the room. "I didn't expect everyone to look so ... glamorous." Where the other guests tried to look older and more progressive, Pam was a few years behind in both trend and maturity. Hair in the same wedge she'd worn since Dorothy Hamill won gold in '76, narrow shoulders overwhelmed by the white Peter Pan collar of her brown velveteen dress, freckled face bare except for a smear of Vaseline across her mouth. "Maybe I shouldn't have come."

"What are you talking about? You look so pretty." Taking her friend's hand, she gave a gentle pull. "Let me introduce you to everyone."

But Pam wouldn't budge. "I called your house earlier and ended up talking to your mom. I said she must be so proud and would probably miss you so much, and she got totally confused. You didn't tell her about London?"

*London.*

The word was like a syringe of adrenaline shot into Oona's heart. Reversing course, she yanked Pam away from the party, up the stairs into the empty kitchen.

"Jeez, Oona, you practically dislocated my shoulder."

"Nobody knows about London. Not Mom, not even Dale."

"Why not?" She tugged on her earlobe, a nervous habit since childhood.

"It's hard to explain." Oona's throat was so parched, she could barely speak. "Hold on." She got a Coke out of the fridge. A metallic snap as she popped the can open and foam gushed over the side. Hurried sips to tame the spill. "I haven't told anyone because I want to make this decision without anyone's input. Especially Mom's or Dale's."

"What is there to decide? We've been dreaming about going to London since we saw *Mary Poppins* in third grade. And now we get to live there."

"I might still get to see London this summer. Dale and I talked about backpacking through Europe. We even started a list of where we'll go. Paris, Berlin, Brussels, London, all the major cities." They'd also made a list of lesser-known European destinations and sights. The ancient seaside villages of Italy's Cinque Terre, Kastellorizo's castle ruins in Greece, Kutná Hora's chapel decorated with human bones in Czechoslovakia. "Of course, this was right before we got the Factory Twelve offer, and there's no telling what'll happen on tour. Dale's convinced some A&R rep will go nuts over us and we'll be recording an album for a major label over the summer. Who knows?"

“Are you serious?” Bafflement contorted Pam’s features. “I know this music stuff is exciting, but it’s not *real life*. You could spend months on a sweaty tour bus and come home broke, or you could spend a year in London and have every door open for you.” A heavy sigh as she glanced down at her Mary Janes. “I’d hate to see you throw away a golden ticket. And you’re running out of time. The paperwork is due in two weeks.”

“I know.” Oona pressed the soda can to her hot forehead. “But ... I haven’t figured it out yet. And I’d like one night off from worrying about it. One night to enjoy this party before things get more complicated. Can we go back downstairs and just have some fun tonight?”

Hesitation in the long breath she took before answering. “Fine. But I need the powder room first.”

“There’s one up here. Down the hall, to your left.”

“Don’t wait, I’ll come find you.”

“You better not run off on me.”

Downstairs, Oona glanced at her watch: 11:40 P.M.

She went over to the beverage table, where Dale was opening a bottle of Cold Duck.

“You’re drinking soda when we have the finest cheap champagne money can buy?” He popped the cork and filled two plastic cups, offering her one. “Come on, let’s celebrate. You’re gonna be the hottest keyboardist in rock ’n’ roll history.”

“Nobody cares about the keyboardist.” Her eyes flickered to her discarded Coke before she took a swallow of champagne. “It’s all about the lead singer or maybe the guitarist, so either way, it’ll be all about you.” *It can’t be about me. I might not be there.*

“No, it’ll be about *us*.” Dale hooked an arm around her waist. A firm promise that whatever came next, he’d be there for it. Oona leaned into him and smiled, believing the promise, reciprocating it.

The floor rumbled beneath her feet. Did the subway run below the house? Maybe it was the energy of the partygoers, dancing so hard they were shaking the foundation. Maybe it was the champagne she had earlier and the hyper-focused adoration of her boyfriend. Oona’s and Dale’s eyes glittered when they locked on each other, as if privy to a secret, connected with a bond as intense as murder accomplices. Their faces drew together and liquid sloshed from their plastic cups as they joined for violent, oblivious kisses that cast the rest of the room in shadow. They kissed like lovers reunited after a battle, even though they spent all but two days of winter break together, even though they both lived in Brooklyn and saw each other all the time. Maybe they weren’t reuniting after a battle as much as preparing for it.

Dale brought his mouth to her ear. “I have a birthday surprise for you. Come on.”

He led her to a screened-off corner of the basement used for storage. On top of a stack of plastic lawn chairs was a rectangular box wrapped in silver paper.

“It’s not my birthday for another half hour,” she protested, even as she smiled.

“I can’t wait any longer. Open it.” He held the box steady as she peeled back the wrapping.

Inside, a layer of tissue paper revealed a black motorcycle jacket with gleaming silver buckles.

Her breath hitched. “It’s too much. You should be saving up for the tour,” she said while fitting her arms through the sleeves over her sequined dress, enveloped by the heaviness and smell of leather.

“Eh, Dad’s been giving me extra shifts at the store, and everyone bought Commodore 64s for Christmas, so I’ve been making good commissions. Does it fit okay?”

“It’s perfect.” Head tilted in mock suspicion, she asked, “Is this because you’re sick of me borrowing your leather jacket all the time?” She’d tell him it was her New York City armor, that she felt safe wearing it.

“No way. I just thought you could use some of your own armor,” he said.

Her heart a hummingbird flying frantic circles in her chest. She wrapped her arms around Dale and murmured, “I’m so damn lucky.”

“Because I spoil you rotten?”

His warm breath made her knees soften and her blood hum. “No, because I get to spend the rest of my life with the coolest guy on the planet.”

“Goddamn right.” He kissed her with a fierceness that made the room go dark and quiet. “I have another surprise for you, but you’ll have to wait until after the countdown for that one.”

“Don’t tell me, don’t tell me!” Holding up a hand, she turned away.

While she normally loved surprises, between the Factory Twelve tour, Dale’s and Wayne’s leaving school, and London looming, Oona was reaching her saturation point.

“Come on, let’s rejoin the others,” Dale said.

The basement was illuminated by clear Christmas lights kept up year-round. White dots of light bouncing between mirrored walls put Oona in the center of a giant disco ball, or a star on the verge of explosion. The room blurred as she blinked back confused tears. This was the culmination of a perfect year. But it wouldn’t last. It couldn’t. Not long after this party, the scales would tip. If Oona said no to London and took a semester off, she’d lose her academic momentum. But would she lose even more if she said no to the band? If Early Dawning went on tour without her, she’d have to contend with Dale’s absence that spring—which would be painful enough—and his disappointment. And that would just be the opening act for her England departure. Could they survive such disruption?

Oona was at the mercy of a clock whose ticking grew louder and faster with each passing hour. A clock that was about to betray her.

She checked the time: 11:55.

In the corner of the room, a small color TV broadcasted the ball drop from Times Square. Corey pointed at the screen. “Is that lit-up thing a cherry?”

“This is why people think drummers are dumb. It’s an apple, you doofus,” Dale said. “You know, like the Big Apple? New York isn’t known as the Big Cherry.”

It wasn’t all that funny, but Oona craved a break, so she threw her head back and laughed. Dale took advantage of her exposed white throat and dove in teeth first, playing

the amorous vampire. The room tilted as he dipped her—the tips of her hair brushing the floor—then shifted further off its axis. Her laughs morphed into squeals of protest, then quieted into murmurs of pleasure. They engulfed and consumed each other, but wasn't that love? She couldn't imagine it being anything less. And now that she had it, she couldn't imagine choosing to leave it behind.

There was that tremor beneath her feet again, the shift and blur at the edges of the room. Had she overdone it with the champagne? Hopefully, she wouldn't be sloppy behind the keyboard and mic when Early Dawning performed a few songs after ushering in 1983.

*Remember this party. Every second of it. Every person here.*

They were a motley bunch. As she gazed around the room, Oona took mental snapshots of her friends, each strange and talented in their own way. She was sure they would all go on to do great things. But would she?

*I wish I didn't have to choose.*

A recurring wish she'd had these last few weeks and one she made again now, unaware that every granted wish comes with a hidden cost, every blessing shadowed with a curse.

The countdown to 1983 began.

“Ten!”

She tightened her hold around Dale's waist, felt this was the pinnacle of her happiness. A panicked voice whispered at the edge of her mind: *There's nowhere higher to go.*

“Nine!”

The jacket made her too warm, but she wouldn't take it off for the rest of the night. She also wouldn't tell Dale it wasn't his jacket's heft that made her feel safe as much as wearing something that belonged to him. Any talisman could've guarded her—a class ring, an old T-shirt, a ratty shoelace—as long as it was his.

“Eight!”

Unfortunately, there were some things her leather armor wouldn't protect her from.

“Seven!”

The tremor intensified, up Oona's legs to the base of her spine, an unseen force that threatened to turn her body into a metronome, setting a new rhythm for her life.

“Six!”

She tried to ignore it.

“Five!”

Perspiration trickled down her temples as she counted down the last seconds of 1982 and her own eighteenth year.

“Four!”

She followed the red glow of the ball descending on TV, crying out with the others, though hers was a cry of pain.

“Three!”

A sharp sensation exploded from the top of Oona's head and spread down the center of her body, an invisible broadsword cutting her in two.

“Two!”

Escalating heat stirred within her as particles scrambled to escape and rearrange, but not now and not here.

“ONE!”