



BEWARE
THE
WOMAN

A NOVEL

MEGAN
ABBOTT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE TURNOUT

ALSO BY MEGAN ABBOTT

The Turnout
Give Me Your Hand
You Will Know Me
The Fever
Dare Me
The End of Everything
Bury Me Deep
Queenpin
The Song Is You
Die a Little
The Street Was Mine



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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
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PUTNAM

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

For Dan, who plucked me from the sea

Beware of the man who wants to protect you; he will protect you from everything but himself.

—Erica Jong



We should go back," he said suddenly, shaking me out of sleep. "What?" I whispered, huddled under the thin bedspread at the motor inn, the air conditioner stuck on HI. "What did you say?"

"We could turn around and go back."

"Go back?" I was trying to see his face in the narrow band of light through the stiff crackling curtains, the gap between every motel curtain ever. "We're only a few hours away."

"We could go back and just explain it wasn't a good time. Not with the baby coming."

His voice was funny, strained from the AC, the detergent haze of the room.

I propped myself up on my elbows, shaking off the bleary weirdness.

We had driven all day. In my head, in my chest, we were still driving, the road buzzing beneath us, my feet shaking, cramped, over the gas.

"But you wanted this," I said, reaching for him. "You said we should go *before* the baby comes."

He didn't say anything, his back to me, the great expanse of his back, my hand on his shoulder blade.

"Jed," I said. "What is it?"

"You're dreaming," he said, his voice lighter, changed. It was like a switch went off.

"What?" I said again, looking at the back of his head, lost in shadow.

"You were dreaming," he said. "Go back to sleep."

A strange feeling came over me. It hadn't been Jed at all. It had been some boogeyman shaking me awake, warning me to go back, go back.

Some boogeyman.

Like Captain Murderer, the smeary white man I used to dream about when I was little.

• • •

Captain Murderer.

Who? my mother used to ask me. *Someone from one of your comic books, or a grown-up movie you snuck over to the Carnahans to see?*

The Carnahans, with six kids from ages four to twenty-four, lived next door in a rambling house, and two of the Carnahan boys fed me warm beer in the basement once when I was ten, and another time I split my lip when one of the girls slammed a screen door on my face, and they loved to set off firecrackers in the driveway all summer long, once burning down the old sycamore everyone loved and it changed the light in our house forever.

But no, Captain Murderer didn't come from the Carnahans' big console TV, videogame cords dangling like spider legs. He didn't come from my comic books or the slumber party stories swapped in our sleeping bags.

He didn't come from anywhere at all. He was always already there.

But who is he? my mother kept asking, unease creeping into her voice.

Captain Murderer, I kept repeating because I assumed she knew him, too, deep down. Like the tooth fairy, the devil with his pitchfork and his flaming tail, like on the can label in the cupboard. *Captain Murderer!*

My mother, face drawn together in worry, would stop what she was doing, folding laundry or wiping glasses in the drying rack, and make me start at the beginning.

And I'd tell her how he was all white, white as milk, head to toe, with white nails and white lashes, teeth like little bones, and one red spot in the middle of his back, between his shoulder blades.

How he moved like bedsheets snapping. How he bit you and his teeth popped out, leaving you with little bones under your skin that everyone would say was a mosquito bite, a fire ant, chiggers.

But where did he come from? my mother would plead. *Was it a story someone told you at camp? Where did he come from?*

Later those nights, after she thought I'd fallen back to sleep, I would hear her moving from room to room, checking all the locks on every window and door.

Click-click, click-click, bolt.

I would hear her breathing all through our little house.

Captain Murderer came from nowhere. But you couldn't tell your mother that.

He came at night, for me.

Captain Murderer came for me!

• • •

Later, the hint of blue dawn, I felt for Jed's wrist. Half lost in sleep, I clambered for him, the crazy, dream-thick thought: *What if Captain Murderer got him?*

But he was in the bathroom, the light under the door, the drone of the automatic fan.

When he came out, a blue shadow in that blue dawn, he stood at the foot of the bed looking at me, his face too dark to see. Only the flicker of the whites of his eyes, wide and wary. Somewhere, a snarl of mosquitoes buzzed, a light sizzling.

Jed, I said, my voice gluey with sleep.

His hands clenching at his sides, looking at me as if I were this strange thing, landed in his bed, come to do him harm or wonder, an alien, a ghost, a succubus.

Jed, sweet Jed, so nervous. My fingertips tingling.

Lifting the sheet, I told him to come inside and he put the heels of his hands on my legs and dragged me to the bottom of the bed, and it was like never before.

All our times, romantic and sticky whispers, but this time something else. Something blue and strange and piercing and I shuddered all through, my breaths catching against his ear.

DAY ONE

We'd been driving forever, the Midwest finally sneaking up on us, the hard smack of road-salt as I-75 widened and widened again.

I'd never seen Jed so nervous. Excited. Both. It was hard to tell.

It was our first road trip together and everything felt impossibly fun: the oversized rental car—a toothpaste-white Chevy—lurching across the lanes, the burr of the air conditioner, the rest stops with the beef jerky and neon flip-flops, the toaster muffins in plastic wrap and the hot dogs slinking on an endless roller grill.

On the crinkly map we traced our route up the great paw of Michigan, I-75 snaking up the state like a wriggly vein.

Sometimes we sang along to indifferent radio. Lite FM and classic rock, the occasional Christian devotional show.

Sometimes we clasped hands clammy from shivering Big Gulps in the cupholders.

Sometimes we made long lists of baby names. We'd already decided we didn't want to know the sex. We didn't care, and just naming names made it feel glorious and impossible all over again, my hand on my belly.

I never even thought I'd have a baby, he was saying, and now here I am and it's the rightest thing I've ever done, and we're rattling off names, Jed rejecting my favorite, "Molly," swiftly and without mercy, confessing finally that he was once *sick with love* over a girl named Molly Kee at summer camp when he was fifteen.

That can't be true, I teased. You told me you'd never been in love before.

He had said it—I never forgot it—one muggy Sunday morning, both of us too tired to make coffee, our arms and legs entwined.

Well, you know, he said now, shrugging, smiling a little, caught.

Sick with love, the phrase so unlikely from his solid, square-jawed Midwestern mouth, the words made me inexplicably sad. Before I knew it, I was crying. My sunglasses sticky from it. It makes me feel silly and sad to think of it now. To feel so close, so encircled and encircling with love and yet . . .

Is it the hormones? That's what he kept saying, hearing the hitch in my voice, sneaking anxious looks at me, wondering if he should pull over.

I'm fine, I sputtered, and then laughed even as the tears slathered me, and somehow he thought that meant keep going, because he kept going, talking about this Molly girl, how she had a chipped tooth that drove him crazy, and how she could land bullseye after bullseye at archery with a longbow she made herself, and how she sang "Coat of Many Colors" at the talent show, and what he would have done, back then, for one glancing touch of the back of her left knee.

Behind my sunglasses, I was crying and couldn't stop and he kept going because he couldn't see. Crying behind one's sunglasses—is there anything lonelier than that?

Finally, my voice became a sob and then he looked at me and stopped the car, skittering up the shoulder.

Jacy, Jacy . . . what's wrong? What did I do?

I wanted to say, *Aren't you sick with love for me?*

What woman doesn't want that, especially with her belly slowly swelling with their first child?

Why did I tell you that? he said at last, shaking his head, grabbing my hand, gripping it until all our fingers went white. *I don't know why I told you that.*

And I felt silly. I was silly. *The hormones, yes. The hormones are killing, killing.*

It's just the hormones, I swear.

• • •

Thirty-two years old, too old to be in love like this, with such teen ferocity and force, but that was how it was and there was no fighting it. Why would I?

I've had men in love with me before—high school Paul, the poet who used to bake me cookies, and Benjy, who broke both my heart and five front windows of the dorm I lived in. I've had men in love with me before, but it never felt like this. Never both of us in the same way at the same time, like two spiders sewing a silken web together.

• • •

After our city hall wedding, four months to the day we met, I remember walking into that impromptu party at that random Irish bar (the Bucket of Blood!) near the courthouse, walking as if I were floating, as if I were a queen entering a palace, a goddess entering heaven. It was all so haphazard and lovely, a clutch of friends hauling a Party City bag bursting with tissue streamers, birdseed confetti, plastic champagne flutes, hanging a curling JUST MARRIED sign above the steam tables, corned beef and cabbage for the day drinkers.

And after everyone had left and we were kicking up streamers under our feet as we dragged ourselves along the carpet, florid and undulating, I remember nearly tripping—an errant champagne stem snapped under my foot—and reaching for him, clutching the front of his shirt.

And I could feel his heart beating like a rabbit's under my hand. Fast and frightened, pounding and alive and terrified.

It charmed me, moved me.

Here he was, a man so strong, so upright, a good man, a man born with certain advantages: middle-class comforts, a college fund, no dependents, a thirty-year-old white man, a craftsman who works with his hands, a solid and kind man with an artistic eye and artistic yearnings. You might think a man like that has never been acquainted with doubt, with fear, with desperation.

And yet. And yet.

I looked up at his face, a narrow slick of frosting on his collar from the cake-cutting—

I looked up at his face, my hand over his thundering heart—

And his eyes were shining with such love, I tell you.

I tell you, it was love. It was love, even if it scared him. The love scared him.

But the truth was Jed ran into the fire. That's how he'd put it: with the proposal, the wedding, the look on his face when the pregnancy stick was still shivering in my hand. He ran into it, the fire, the fear. He said it made him feel alive.

He was looking at me, eyes blinking as if shaking off the sandman's grit from them. Like my grandma when I was little, putting her cool hand over my crusted eyes.

He was looking at me, his face full of wonder—*Could this be true? Could it? Could we be married? Could you be my wife?*

He was looking at me like I'd saved his life. Which, he whispered to me in the blue-dark of our honeymoon suite hours later, I had.



I never thought this would happen to me, Jed told me that night, our wedding night. *I'd given up on it happening.*

When he said it, I thought, how strange for a man to feel that. To feel like a girl, waiting, waiting, like when all her friends at school got their first period, one by one, the tampons in their purse zipper

pocket, the whispers about the ruby slick on their underpants and now they were women . . .

I was afraid I wasn't made for it, he told me.

For marriage? I asked, smiling gently, nudging him, teasing. *Or love?*

For anything, he said. And that's when I saw it in his eyes. How deep this went and how impenetrable it felt. How had I never known this. How—

For anything but being alone.

• • •

Most men are that way, sweetie, my mom always said. *And it doesn't change when they get married. They think if they get married, it'll change it. You think that too. But they're lone wolves, these kinds of men. Most men.*

But that was my mother's generation, the world they lived in, the world of women huddled in kitchens and over playpens, with their husbands at the grill, a ring of khakis, fingers clipping beer necks and busting chops over a bad trade, never able to connect, to relate, unless on the football field, on the ice, feelings forever unspoken, unspoiled.

• • •

Jacy went and married a signmaker! my mother shouted to Aunt Laraine when I called her, the two of them forever sitting at my mother's kitchen table, sneaking cigarettes and beating their breasts over the news.

I had to explain, yet again, that Jed was not merely a signmaker. That neon is both an art and a science, and yes, while commissions—for the occasional casino, for food trucks, trendy hotels—and restorations were his primary income, he also worked on his own pieces (*like the picture I sent you!*) and on restoring grand old signs

from back before jumbotrons and LED and plastic, back in the day when neon was king.

If you could see him in his studio, I wanted to say. Heating the glass tubes with torches, bending them into these glorious glowing creations. Manipulating voltage and gas, heat and pressure. The red of neon, the cool blue of argon. The inside of each tube coated with colored powder, the blending of colors. The scorching pinks and sizzling purples.

I remember when he first showed me. *No gloves*, he said, laying his hand on the radiant tube, its center flamed, his face glowing. *Gloves get in the way*.

How I gasped when he placed his hand on the searing glass. The hiss of the constant flame.

He had burned his hands countless times, patches on his palm, a knuckle, his thumb joint, like his hand had been put back together hastily. There were hard flaps on his skin where he could barely feel and I loved when they brushed against my cheek, between my thighs.

• • •

We made promises that night, our wedding night. We drained the bottle of Mumm's—the one that appeared at our apartment in a misted bucket courtesy of my new father-in-law, whom I'd yet to meet. We drained the whole thing while Jed washed my hair over the sink to get all the confetti out, the birdseed.

His hands on my hair, the strength of those hands, their delicacy—a sculptor's hands, a sculpture of heat and light—and I had to have him all over again, sinking to my knees on the soft pill of the bath rug.

The sweetness of him, the amniotic salt, the shudder that went through him.

• • •

It's real and it's forever, I had told my mom over the phone the next morning.

Good, honey, she said, a choke in her voice. *If you don't think that now, you're really in trouble.*

• • •

Yes, it had happened fast. Too fast for our families to come to the wedding.

I had had to make amends to my mom, my cousins, my aunt and uncle.

But Jed only had his dad and his dad was traveling. I had the feeling they weren't close, though it was hard to know.

The following week, we had dinner with him on our way out west for our honeymoon. And Jed was nervous, so nervous, but it had gone so well. Perfect, really.

• • •

He's here, Jed said, his eyes bright, head bobbing, as we stood in the hotel lobby.

Under the garish chandelier, a silver-haired man smiled at us, his teeth gleaming.

Doctor Ash, I said, so tentative.

I'd had this idea of him—from Jed's stories, from the blurry father-and-son-at-graduation photo, radiator-curling, on Jed's bookshelf—that he was an old-school dad, a Midwestern white dude, the kind all those fish-tackle and golf-club Father's Day cards are for.

So I was surprised how dapper he was, handsome like Jed, but Jed in nice clothing, a fine wool suit and stylish Italian loafers alongside Jed's flannel and jeans.

His voice so low and gentle, a little burr in it, I felt instantly at ease. He started by teasing me gently about the sort of woman who'd take on an Ash man. Then he said he was sorry we hadn't met before, but not to blame Jed. After all, he lived way up in the tippy top of Michigan, the vacation home of Jed's childhood, and didn't travel much in his early retirement. *After a lifetime of travel for work, he laughed, all I want to do is stay home, in my study, with my books and my bourbon.*

I said that sounded pretty wonderful to me.

But mostly, he said, he wanted to make sure Jed was taking good care of me and whether he washed the dishes and to make sure I don't, not once, pick up after him, not even a stray sock.

As if Jed ever left socks around, or anything.

What matters most to me is that whenever you're talking he's listening.

What matters most to me is that you feel loved. Jed is, in some ways, still learning to love.

And he explained that Jed's mom, dying as she did, when he was so young—well, that had to leave its marks.

I tried to give him everything, he said. But there are limits to what a father can offer a son. Maybe that makes me sound old-fashioned.

I told him it did but only in the best way.

• • •

He took us to the finest restaurant in town, cracked crab and French wine, and he gave me all his attention. He wanted to know all about me, starting at the beginning. The warm feeling when he smiled at Jed a mere ten minutes into dinner, telling him, *My boy, you did good.*

After two glasses, my own head slightly wobbly, he started regaling us with stories of his own blessed wedding to Jed's late

mother, gone since Jed was a baby. They'd exchanged vows overlooking Bridalveil Falls in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and he really, truly had forgotten the ring and they'd had to improvise with a gumball-machine ring from a nearby IGA, even though everyone warned them it was bad luck.

How delightful and surprising it had been to watch Jed watching his father. Doctor Ash had raised his glass to toast us and as he did, his voice warbled a little, a sneaky choke in his throat. What a thing from a man so barrel-chested and robust, six feet two—two inches taller than his son, he told me—and the rolling shoulders of a youthful swimmer. A man so dignified and assured.

Jed, the look on his face seeing that.

And I realized in an instant they were much closer than I'd guessed.

That's what marriage is, I thought. Discovering something new about your spouse every day.

Young love, pure and true, Doctor Ash said as we all raised our glasses on the swollen terrace of the restaurant. Let it last, trap it in amber. Do what you can while you can.

How Jed had swallowed hard, turning his face away.

So moved he was, I was.

• • •

When we arrived in Honolulu for our honeymoon, a message awaited us:

Now the work of love begins! Love, Dad

"When I was a kid, he still sent telegrams," Jed said with a funny smile.

"I thought telegrams were only in movies," I said, charmed by it. "Like ascots and bonbons."

"Yeah, well," Jed said, "he's old-fashioned, I guess."



My mom told me once that I had “terminally bad” taste in men. It was after Benjy, because it took me a dozen calls with all three credit bureaus and two cycles of antibiotics to clean up after him.

Honey, if anyone should know about bad men, she said, it's me. How it can happen, a vulnerable moment, the way they can come on so strong, burrowing into your bed, your life. Everything was so exciting at the start with Benjy. I read about it later in a book someone gave me—the “love bomb,” they call it, which is what it feels like, an explosion in the heart. It's only later, after—after the open-handed smack, after he pockets the rent money, after you find his nineteen-year-old drawing student in your bed, her thong wrapped around the bedpost—that you learn the warning signs. Which were warning sirens, warning explosions.

I had bad taste in men, but then came Jed.

• • •

Sometimes you don't know for a long time, sometimes you know right away.

With Jed, it was our second date, and I'd dragged him along to a colleague's birthday dinner and then I'd eaten that bad mussel and gotten so sick in the cramped restroom of the loud restaurant, the maître d' pounding on the door.

How Jed interceded, helping me to my feet. How he quietly remonstrated the maître d' and put his arm around me, guiding me past the crowded tables, the newly sickening stench of brine and drawn butter. How small and safe I felt under the shield of him, of Jed, of Jed the rescuer, the gallant knight.

My jacket and purse draped over his arm looked like doll clothes.

How he'd taken me home in that sweaty cab and didn't blink when the fare over the county line jumped into three digits and

when we idled in front of my building, the front door lock taped open so the neighbors could smoke out front.

How he walked me past the trio of sullen teenagers and the wrinkly lady who read fortunes out her front window. How, in the lobby, the lights hurting my eyes, making my feet feel rubbery and my knees, too, he asked if he could come inside and help me and we could leave the door open if I wanted but four floors was a long way up.

On the stairwell, I thought I might be sick again, and we stood on the second-floor landing, me bent over at the waist, afraid to move or even breathe.

How embarrassed I was, sure I smelled of vomit, a slick of something on my throat.

And yet Jed persevered, delivering me, wobble-kneed, to my door.

Come in, I said, my clammy hand on my keys.

Jed made me ginger tea and draped my ratty throw over me. He took my temperature with the back of his hand. He told me his father was a doctor and then got embarrassed, adding he knew that didn't mean anything and did I want him to go, did I want some privacy?

And how I didn't, not at all.

All I wanted was him to rest that hand on me again.

• • •

When you throw up in front of someone, you jump three stages, he'd said the next morning, laughing.

• • •

So you see, everything was different from the start.

And that's what I told Doctor Ash.

Everything was so different, like no other boy or man. And I was different with him, different than with Benjy, the rest. Letting him make me dinner, giving him a key to my apartment, ordering him that special pillow he needed for his back.

We take care of each other, I said.

Everything was different, right from the start.

Everything was different, like love is.

• • •

It's not like I'm marrying a stranger, I'd told my mom over the phone the day we went to city hall.

Honey, she said, we all marry strangers.

That's what she said.