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**JESSICA KNOLL**



*A Novel*

**BRIGHT**

**YOUNG**

**WOMEN**

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**BRIGHT**  
**YOUNG**  
**WOMEN**

**JESSICA KNOLL**

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*For C—I couldn't have written the last line without you.*

# PAMELA

Montclair, New Jersey

Day 15,825

*You may not remember me, but I have never forgotten you,* begins the letter written in the kind of cursive they don't teach in schools anymore. I read the sentence twice in stinging astonishment. It's been forty-three years since my brush with the man even the most reputable papers called the All-American Sex Killer, and my name has long since fallen to a footnote in the story.

I'd given the return address only a cursory glance before sliding a nail beneath the envelope's gummed seam, but now I hold it at arm's length and say the sender's name out loud, emphatically, as though I've been asked to answer the same question twice by someone who definitely heard me the first time. The letter writer is wrong. I have never forgotten her either, though she is welded to a memory that I've often wished I could.

"You say something, hon?" My secretary has moonwalked her rolling chair away from her desk, and now she sits framed by my open office door with a solicitous tilt of her head. Janet calls me *hon* and sometimes *kiddo*, though she is only seven years older than I am. If anyone refers to her as my administrative assistant, she will press her lips together whitely. That's the sort of current-climate pretension Janet doesn't care for.

Janet watches me flip the navy-bordered note card, back to front, front to back, generating a slight wind that lifts my bangs from my forehead. I must look like I'm fanning myself, about to faint, because she hurries over and I feel her hand grazing my midback. She fumbles with her readers, which hang from her

neck on a rhinestone-strung chain, then juts her sharp chin over my shoulder to read the outstanding summons.

“This is dated nearly three months ago,” I say with a ripple of rage. That the women who should be the first to know were always the last was the reason my doctor made me cut out salt for the better part of the eighties. “Why am I just seeing it now?” *What if I’m too late?*

Janet mean-mugs the date. February 12, 2021. “Maybe security flagged it.” She goes over to my desk and locates the envelope on top of my leather-looking-but-synthetically-priced desk pad. “Uh-huh.” She underlines the return address in the upper-left corner with a square nail. “Because it’s from Tallahassee. They would have flagged that for sure.”

“Shit,” I say insubstantially. I am standing there when, just like that night, my body begins to move without any conscious consent from my mind. I find that I am packing up for the day, though it’s just after lunch and I have mediation at four. “*Shit,*” I say again, because this tyrannous part of me has decided that I will not only be canceling my afternoon but I will also incur a no-show fee for tomorrow’s six a.m. spin class.

“What can I do for you?” Janet is regarding me with the combination of concern and resignation that I haven’t seen in a long time—the look people give you when the very worst has happened, and really, there isn’t anything anyone can do for you, for any of us, because some of us die early and inconveniently and there is no way to predict if it will be you next, and before you know it, mourner and comforter are staring dead-eyed into the abyss. The routine comes to me viscerally though it’s been eight presidential administrations. Three impeachments. One pandemic. The towers going down. Facebook. Tickle Me Elmo. Snapple iced tea. They never got to taste Snapple iced tea. But it didn’t happen in some bygone era either. If they had lived, they’d be the same age as Michelle Pfeiffer.

“I think I’m going to Tallahassee,” I say in disbelief.

## Tallahassee, Florida

January 14, 1978

### Seven hours before

On Saturday nights, we kept our doors open while we got ready. Girls went in one room wearing one thing and came out wearing something shorter. The hallways were as tight and restricted as the passageways on a navy ship, snarled with chatter about who was doing what and going where and with whom. Hair spray and nail polish fumed our personal ozone layer, the blast of blow-dryers raising the mercury four, sometimes five degrees on the analog thermometer mounted to the wall. We'd crack the windows for fresh air and mock the music coming from the bar next door; Saturday night was disco night, which was for old people. It was a statistical impossibility that something bad could happen with Barry Gibb cheeping in his far-reaching falsetto that we'd all live to see another day, but we are what mathematics models refer to as outliers.

A coy voice accompanied the patterning of knuckles on my door. "I think it might snow." I looked up from the volunteer schedules papering my hand-me-down secretary's desk to see Denise Andora standing on the threshold, hands clasped girlishly at her pelvis.

"Nice try." I laughed. Denise was angling to borrow my shearling coat. Though the winter of 1978 had brought a deep freeze to the Panhandle that killed the azalea trees along the Georgia border, it was never cold enough to snow.

"*Please, Pamela!*" Denise put her hands together in prayer, repeating her plea over red fingertips with crescendoing urgency. "Please. Please. *Please*. Nothing I have goes." She turned in place to prove her point. I only know the minute details of what she was wearing that night because later there was a description of her outfit in the paper: thin turtleneck tucked into snap-front jeans, suede

belt and suede boots in matching chestnut brown, opal earrings, and a beloved silver charm bracelet. My best friend was approximately one hundred feet tall and weighed less than I did as a child, but by senior year I'd learned to manage my envy like a migraine. What triggered that star-seeing pain was looking too closely at Denise when she decided she needed attention from men.

"Don't make me beg." She stomped her foot a little. "Roger asked some of the girls if I was coming tonight."

I put my pencil down. "Denise," I admonished.

I'd long ago lost count of the number of times Denise and Roger had called it quits only to encounter each other out at night, however many warm beers and deep lovelorn glances it took to forgive the spiteful things they'd each said to and about the other, but this most recent split didn't feel so much like a split as it did a severing with a dirty kitchen knife, quite literally infecting Denise, who vomited everything she ate for nearly a week and had to be briefly admitted to the hospital for dehydration. When I picked her up at the curb, she swore Roger was out of her system for good. *I flushed twice for good measure*, she'd said, laughing feebly as I helped her out of the hospital-mandated wheelchair and into the passenger seat of the car.

Denise shrugged now with sudden, suspicious indifference, sauntering over to my window. "It's only a few blocks to Turq House. On the night they're calling for three inches of snow. I'll be a little cold but"—she swung the lock lever and pushed her palms against the glass, leaving behind prints that would soon have no living match—"maybe Roger will volunteer to warm me up." She faced me, shoulders thrust back in the frostbitten room. Unless her parents were coming to visit for the weekend, Denise's bra remained collecting pills in her top drawer.

I could feel my willpower eroding. "Do you *promise* to get it dry-cleaned after?"

"Yes, ma'am, Pam Perfect, ma'am." Denise clicked her heels with a militant clang. *Pam Perfect* was her not-entirely-affectionate nickname for me, cribbed from the popular prime-time commercials featuring the woman with the feathered bangs, talking about the pure vegetable spray that saves her time,



money, *and* calories. *With PAM cooking*, she trumpets while sliding a silver-skinned fish from frying pan to plate, *dinner always turns out PAM perfect*.

Denise was the first friend I'd made at Florida State University, but recently we'd found ourselves at an impasse. The rot at the core of Panhellenic leadership had always been favoritism, with former presidents hewing close to the rule book for some of their sisters while allowing their friends to get away with murder. When I ran for the position and won, I knew Denise had expected leniency with my name at the top of the executive board. Instead, I was so determined to do better than those who had come before me, to be remembered as a fair and impartial leader, that Denise had more strikes against her than any other sister that quarter. Every time she blew off Monday's chapter meeting or postponed a service trip, it was like she was daring me to kick her out. The other girls watched us like two whitetail bucks who had put our heads down and locked antlers. Our treasurer, an auburn-haired Miss Florida finalist who'd grown up hunting in Franklin County, was always saying that one of us better submit before we got stuck and had to be sawed apart. She'd seen it happen in the wild.

"You can wear the coat," I relented.

Denise capered to my closet with childlike glee that made me feel like an awful shrew. Her eyes rolled back as she slipped her arms into the silk-lined coat. I had beautiful clothes that fit like a second, softer skin, thanks to a mother who devoted her life to caring about such things. Maybe I would care too if I wore half my wardrobe as well as Denise. As it was, I had a round Irish face that contradicted my figure. That's what I had—not a body but a figure. The disconnect between my freckled apple cheeks and pinup proportions was extreme enough that I often felt the need to apologize for it. I should be prettier or less, depending on who was looking and where.

"Can you shut my window before you go?" I slapped my desk with an open palm as a gust of wind blew into the room, threatening to spirit away my color-coordinated calendar pages.

Denise went over to the window and staged a hammy show, pressing down on the rail and grunting like she was giving it her all. "It's stuck," Denise said. "You better come with me so you don't freeze to death planning the thirty-third annual blood drive. What a way to go."

I sighed, not because I longed to attend a shouty fraternity party and couldn't because I did in fact have to organize the thirty-third annual blood drive; my sigh was because I did not know how to make Denise understand that I did not *want* to go, that I was never more content than I was sitting at my pencil-scratched desk on a Saturday night, my door open to the din and the drama of thirty-eight girls getting ready to go out, feeling like I'd done the job I was elected to do if, by the end of the week, everyone could put on music and mascara and taunt one another from across the hall. The things I heard from my room. The absolute hell we gave one another. Who needed to shave her big toes and who should never dance in public if she had any desire to eventually procreate.

"You'll have more fun without me," I demurred lamely.

"You know, one day," Denise said, turning to close the window for real this time, her long dark hair flapping behind her like a hero's cape, "those cans of yours are gonna be in your lap, and you're going to look back and wish—"

Denise broke off with a scream that my nervous system barely registered. We were twenty-one-year-old sorority girls; we screamed not because something was heinously, improbably wrong but because Saturday nights made us excitable and slaphappy. I have since come to loathe the day most people look forward to all week, its false sense of security, its disingenuous promise of freedom and fun.

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Outside on the front lawn, two of our sorority sisters were huffing and hauling a blanketed parcel roughly the dimensions of a movie poster, their cheeks chapped pink with cold and exertion, their pupils dilated in a hunted, heart-pounding way.

"Help us," they were half-laughing, half-panting when Denise and I met them on our short stamp of lawn, edged with pink bursts of muhly grass to dissuade patrons of the bar next door from parking on our property when the lot filled up. It was such a successful trick of landscaping that none of the students crossing paths on the sidewalk, on their way to grab a bite at the Pop Stop before it closed, had stepped over to lend a hand.

I positioned myself in the middle, squatting and lifting the base in an underhand grip, but Denise just rounded her fingers and produced an earsplitting whistle that stopped cold two guys cutting through our alleyway. No amount of landscaping could deter people from pinching our shortcut, and I couldn't say I blamed them. Tallahassee blocks were as long as New York City avenues, and Denise loved that I knew that.

"We could use a hand." Denise tossed the dark hair she had spent hours coaxing into silken submission and popped a hip, every man's fantasy hitchhiker.

I saw bitten-down boy fingernails curl under the base of our illicit delivery, inches from my own, and I was relieved of the weight instantly. I moved to the head of the operation to direct the guys up the three front steps and then—*carefully, a little to the left, no, other left!*—through the double front doors. We'd just had them repainted cornflower blue to match the striations in the wallpaper in the foyer, where, at that moment, everyone congregated—the girls in the kitchen making popcorn, the girls who had bundled together on the rec room couch to catch up on weekday tapings of *As the World Turns*, the girls who were going out, hot rollers in their bangs and waving their wet nails dry. They wanted to see what all the commotion was about as much as they wanted to slyly assess our handlers off the street, older than we were by at least eight years but not any older than the professors who routinely asked us out to dinner.

There was some arguing about what to do next. Denise was insisting the guys continue up the stairs, but the only men allowed on the second floor were family members on move-in day and the houseboy when there was a repair to be made.

"Don't be like this, Pamela," Denise pleaded. "You know if we leave it here, they'll steal it back before we can make the trade." Though the cargo was draped in a bedsheet, we all knew that it was a framed composite from our sweetheart fraternity, every active member unsmiling in a suit and tie, their rattlesnake-and-double-sword coat of arms at the center. We'd been going back and forth for months, each house lifting one of the other's composites and leaving behind a sooty square that not even a heavy-duty ammonia solution would wipe away.

Denise was staring at me with glittering, kohl-rimmed *gotcha!* eyes. Over a decade later, when I finally became a mother, I would recognize this trick, this asking for something you knew you weren't allowed to have in front of a

roomful of people who wanted you to have it. There was no saying no unless you didn't mind everyone thinking you were a mean old hag.

I produced a scoffing sound from the base of my throat. How dare she even ask.

Denise's lips parted, her features slackening in disappointment. I knew this look too. It was the look Denise got every time she encountered me as chapter president after so long of knowing me as her friend.

"Man on the floor!" I shouted, and Denise seized me by the shoulders, shaking me with playful contention. I'd *nearly* gotten her. We were swept up then by the other girls moving like a school of fish, one vibrant body thinned by the stairwell and reshaped on the landing, squeezed thin again by our tapered halls. The whole time we were singing "man on the floor," not in unison, but single voices in gravelly competition with one another. There had been that Paul McCartney song—"Band on the Run"—which to one of my sisters, no one could ever remember who, had always sounded like "*Man* on the Run," and with one more modification the inside joke of The House was born. It was so catchy that the next morning, sitting in our dining room in dazed compliance, I heard the hum of the chorus. There were loads of men on the floor at that point, some in blue, some in white lab coats, the ones in charge in street clothes, and they were cutting bloody squares out of our carpets and tweezing back molars from the shag. And then someone else sang it full force—"man on the floor, maaaaan on the floor!"—and we started laughing, real deep-bellied laughs that made some of our uniformed house guests pause on the stairwell and look in at us, only traces of concern on their scowling, reproachful faces.

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The composite was delivered to room four, the room of the girls who had pulled off the heist. Our handlers took in the limited quarters skeptically, before kicking the door shut with their heels and leaning the prized piece against the foot of one of the twin beds. If you wanted to get in that room, you had to turn sideways, and even then I don't think I could have slipped inside, not with my *figure*.

"You don't have an attic or anything?" one of the guys asked.

We did, but having the composite in your room was like hanging a pair of stag antlers on your wall, Denise explained to them. Already, some of the flatter-chested girls were squeezing through the cracked-open door with their cameras to take pictures of the hometown heroes in room four, who posed alongside their kill grinning, air guns drawn and hair tumbling down their backs like Charlie's Angels. In a few hours, he would try to enter this room but would be met with too much resistance owing to the composite of the 1948 class—I still remember that was the year the girls filched, can still see their oiled hair and horn-rimmed eyeglasses. Today Sharon Selva is an oral surgeon in Austin and Jackie Clurry a tenured professor in the history department of the very university held captive by terror that winter of 1978, all because of some silly Greek prank.

Denise went determinedly to the small amber-bodied lamp the girls kept on top of a stack of old magazines, screwing off the shade and stretching the cord as far as it would go so she could crouch before the picture and scan its surface with the bare bulb, not unlike a beachgoer with a handheld metal detector. She shook her head in awe. "Even their composites from the forties were mounted with museum quality!" she cried with deeply felt outrage.

For two years, we'd allowed the guys of Turq House—short for the shade their shutters and doors were painted—to think they were partaking in the classic friendly theft that had been occurring between sweetheart sororities and fraternities for generations. What they didn't know was that we'd been swapping out the high-quality glass from their composites for the acrylic plexiglass from ours before proffering the exchange. It was Denise who caught the discrepancy, back when we were sophomores.

*This glass is gorgeous*, she'd breathed, and the older girls had laughed, because Robert Redford was gorgeous, but glass? Little sophomore Denise had marched us down to our display wall and pointed out the differences—see how faded our composites had become? Turq House was using glass, expensive museum-grade glass that protected their photographs from damaging elements like the sun and dust mites. Denise was a fine art and modern languages double major—the former concentration had always been the plan, the latter added to the mix that past summer, after she read in the *Tallahassee Democrat* about the construction

of a state-of-the-art Salvador Dalí museum down in St. Petersburg, Florida. Denise had immediately shifted to declare a double major in modern languages, concentration in Spanish, spending the summer after her twentieth birthday on campus, making up two years' worth of credits. Dalí himself would be flying in to interview prospective staff, and Denise intended to dazzle him in his native language. Hardly surprising, but when they eventually met, he was completely taken with her, hiring her as an assistant gallerist to start the Monday after graduation.

"I doubt they'd even notice..." Sophomore Denise had trailed off, smart enough to know that as a pledge, she couldn't be the one to propose it.

There were and continue to be plenty of disparities between fraternity and sorority living, but the big one that the chapter president at the time was always going on about was the level at which Greek alumni gave back to their organizations. Fraternity men had, for generations, gone on to become more economically sound than sorority women, and by and large their houses boasted newer furniture, top-of-the-line air-conditioning units, and, "As our eagle-eyed sister Denise Andora recently pointed out," she said at the top of the next chapter meeting, "even *clearer* glass than we do."

The ploy was condoned that evening, and I've heard rumblings that the girls are still at it today.

Denise tapped her long nails on that durable, reflection-controlled glass and groaned almost sexually. "God, that's good stuff," she said.

"Would you like us to leave you alone with the glass, Denise?" Sharon asked, deadpan.

"To hell with Roger." Denise planted a wet one on the limpid surface. "This glass and I are going to live a very long and happy life together."

Sometimes, when I get an unfavorable outcome in court, when I start thinking justice may be a fallacy after all, I remember that Salvador Dalí died six hours before Denise's killer went to the electric chair. January 23, 1989: look it up. The passing of one of the world's most celebrated and eccentric artists ensured that the execution of some lowlife in Central Florida was not the top news story of the day, and he would have dead-man-walked to the execution chamber bereft over that. More than his own freedom, more than the chance to

make me sorry for what I did to him, what he wanted was a spectacle. On these bad days, I like to think that Denise is up there, wherever it is truly smashing women go when they die, and that she'd managed to pull a few strings. Overshadowed his death the way he did her fleeting time on this earth. Revenge is a dish best served cold. The vixens of *As the World Turns* taught us that.