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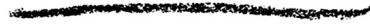
HIDDEN PICTURES

A NOVEL



JASON REKULAK

HIDDEN PICTURES



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Illustrations by Will Staehle and Doogie Horner



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FOR JULIE

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A few years back I was running out of money so I volunteered for a research study at the University of Pennsylvania. The directions brought me to the campus medical center in West Philly and a large auditorium filled with women, all between eighteen and thirty-five years old. There weren't enough chairs and I was among the last to arrive so I had to sit shivering on the floor. They had free coffee and chocolate donuts and a big TV playing *The Price Is Right*, but most everyone was looking at their phones. The vibe was a lot like the DMV except we were all getting paid by the hour so people seemed happy to wait all day.

A doctor in a white lab coat got up and introduced herself. She said her name was Susan or Stacey or Samantha and she was a fellow in the Clinical Research program. She read all the usual disclaimers and warnings, and reminded us that compensation would be issued in the form of Amazon gift cards, not checks or cash. A couple people grumbled, but I didn't care; I had a boyfriend who bought gift cards off me for eighty cents on the dollar, so I was all set.

Every few minutes, Susan (I think it was Susan?) called a name from her clipboard and one of us would leave the room. No one ever came back. Pretty soon there were plenty of open seats, but I stayed on the floor because I didn't think I could move without throwing up. My body ached and I had the chills. But eventually word got around that they weren't prescreening people—which is to say, no one was going to test my urine or take my pulse or do anything that might disqualify me—so I popped a 40 in my mouth and sucked until the waxy yellow coating came off. Then I spat it back in my palm, crushed it between my thumbs, and snuffed like maybe a third of it.

Just enough to get me back on. The rest went into a tiny piece of foil for later. And after that I stopped shaking, and waiting on the floor wasn't so bad.

Some two hours later the doctor finally called "Quinn? Mallory Quinn?" and I walked down the aisle to meet her, dragging my heavy winter parka on the floor behind me. If she noticed I was high, she didn't say anything. She just asked for my age (nineteen) and my date of birth (March 3), and then she compared my answers to the information on her clipboard. And I guess she decided I was sober enough, because she led me through a maze of hallways until we arrived at a small windowless room.

There were five young men seated in a row of folding chairs; they were all staring at the floor, so I couldn't see their faces. But I decided they were med students or residents—they all wore hospital scrubs, still creased and bright navy blue, like they were fresh off the rack.

"All right, Mallory, we'd like you to stand at the front of the room, facing the guys. Right here on the X, that's perfect. Now let me tell you what's going to happen, before we put on your blindfold." And I realized she was holding a black eye mask—the sort of soft cotton visor that my mother used to wear at bedtime.

She explained that all the men were currently looking at the floor—but sometime in the next few minutes, they were going to look at my body. My job was to raise my hand if I felt "the male gaze" on my person. She told me to keep my hand suspended for as long as the feeling lasted, and lower it whenever the feeling went away.

"We'll do it for five minutes, but after we finish we might want you to repeat the experiment. Do you have any questions before we start?"

I started laughing. "Yeah, have you guys read *Fifty Shades of Grey*? Because I'm pretty sure this is chapter twelve."

This was my attempt at a little light humor, and Susan smiled to be polite but none of the guys were paying attention. They were futzing with their clipboards and synchronizing their stopwatches. The mood in the classroom was all business. Susan fitted the mask over my eyes, then adjusted the strap so it wasn't too tight. "All right, Mallory, does that feel okay?"

"Sure."

"And you're ready to begin?"

"Yes."

“Then we’ll start on my count of three. Gentlemen, get your watches ready. That’s one, two, three.”

It’s very weird, standing still for five minutes, blindfolded, in a perfectly silent room, knowing that guys might be looking at your boobs or your butt or whatever. There were no sounds or clues to help me guess what was happening. But I definitely felt them watching. I raised and lowered my hand several times, and the five minutes seemed to last an hour. After we finished, Susan asked me to repeat the experiment, and we did it all over again. Then she asked me to repeat the experiment a third time! And when she finally pulled off the blindfold, all the guys stood up and started clapping, like I’d just won an Academy Award.

Susan explained that they’d been performing the experiment all week on hundreds of women—but I was the first person to deliver a near-perfect score, to report the gaze three times with 97 percent accuracy.

She told the guys to take a break and then ushered me into her office and started asking questions. Namely, how did I know the men were staring at me? And I didn’t have the words to explain—I just knew. It was like a fluttery feeling on the periphery of my attention—a kind of spidey sense. I bet there’s a good chance you’ve felt it yourself, that you know exactly what I’m talking about.

“Plus, there’s a kind of sound.”

Her eyes went wide. “Really? You *hear* something?”

“Sometimes. It’s very high-pitched. Like when a mosquito buzzes too close to your ear.”

She reached for her laptop so fast she nearly dropped it. She typed a bunch of notes, then asked if I’d be willing to come back in a week for more tests. I said for twenty bucks an hour, I would come back as much as she wanted. I gave her my cell phone number and she promised to call me to set up an appointment—but that very night, I traded my iPhone for five Oxy-80s, so she had no way of tracking me down, and I never heard from her again.

★ ★ ★

Now that I’m clean, I have a million regrets—and trading away my iPhone is the least of them. But sometimes I’ll remember the experiment and I’ll start to wonder. I’ve tried to find the doctor online but obviously I don’t even

remember her name. One morning I took the bus to the university medical center and tried to find the auditorium, but the campus is all different now; there are a bunch of new buildings and everything's scrambled. I've tried googling phrases like "gaze detection" and "gaze perception" but every result says these aren't real phenomena—there's no evidence that anyone has "eyes in the back of their head."

And I guess I've resigned myself to the fact that the experiment didn't actually happen, that it's one of the many false memories I acquired while abusing oxycodone, heroin, and other drugs. My sponsor, Russell, says false memories are common among addicts. He says an addict's brain will "remember" happy fantasies so we can avoid dwelling on real memories—all the shameful things we did to get high, all the shitty ways we hurt good people who loved us.

"Just listen to the details of your story," Russell points out. "You arrive on the campus of a prestigious Ivy League university. You're strung out on kickers and no one cares. You enter a room full of handsome young doctors. Then they stare at your body for fifteen minutes and erupt in a standing ovation! I mean, come on, Quinn! You don't have to be Sigmund Freud to figure this out!"

And he's right, obviously. One of the hardest things about recovery is coming to terms with the fact that you can't trust your brain anymore. In fact, you need to understand that your brain has become your own worst enemy. It will steer you toward bad choices, override logic and common sense, and warp your most cherished memories into impossible fantasies.

But here are some absolute truths:

My name is Mallory Quinn and I am twenty-one years old.

I've been in recovery for eighteen months, and I can honestly say I have no desire to use alcohol or drugs.

I have worked the Twelve Steps and I have surrendered my life to my lord and savior Jesus Christ. You won't see me on street corners handing out Bibles, but I do pray every day that He will help me stay sober, and so far it's working.

I live in northeast Philadelphia at Safe Harbor, a city-sponsored home for women in advanced stages of recovery. We call it a "three-quarters house" instead of a halfway house because we've all proven our sobriety and earned

a lot of personal freedoms. We buy our own groceries, cook our own meals, and don't have a lot of annoying rules.

Mondays through Fridays, I'm a teacher's aide at Aunt Becky's Childcare Academy, a mouse-infested rowhome with sixty young scholars ages two to five. I spend a good part of my life changing diapers, dishing out Goldfish crackers, and playing *Sesame Street* DVDs. After work I'll go for a run and then attend a meeting, or I'll just stay in Safe Harbor with my housemates and we'll all watch Hallmark Channel movies like *Sailing into Love* or *Forever in My Heart*. Laugh if you want, but I guarantee you will never turn on a Hallmark Channel movie and see a prostitute snorting lines of white powder. Because I don't need those images taking up space in my brain.

Russell agreed to sponsor me because I used to be a distance runner and he has a long history of training sprinters. Russell was an assistant coach on Team USA at the 1988 Summer Olympics. Later he led teams at Arkansas and Stanford to NCAA track and field championships. And later still he drove over his next-door neighbor while blitzed on methamphetamine. Russell served five years for involuntary manslaughter and later became an ordained minister. Now he sponsors five or six addicts at a time, most of them washed-up athletes like myself.

Russell inspired me to start training again (he calls it "running to recovery") and every week he drafts customized workouts for me, alternating long runs and wind sprints along the Schuylkill River with weights and conditioning at the YMCA. Russell is sixty-eight years old with an artificial hip but he still benches two hundred pounds and on weekends he'll show up to train alongside me, offering pointers and cheering me on. He's forever reminding me that women runners don't peak until age thirty-five, that my best years are way ahead of me.

He also encourages me to plan for my future—to make a fresh start in a new environment, far away from old friends and old habits. Which is why he's arranged a job interview for me with Ted and Caroline Maxwell—friends of his sister who have recently moved to Spring Brook, New Jersey. They're looking for a nanny to watch their five-year-old son, Teddy.

"They just moved back from Barcelona. The dad works in computers. Or business? Something that pays good, I forget the details. Anyhow, they moved here so Teddy—the kid, not the dad—can start school in the fall.

Kindergarten. So they want you to stay through September. But if things work out? Who knows? Maybe they keep you around.”

Russell insists on driving me to the interview. He’s one of these guys who’s always dressed for the gym, even when he’s not working out. Today he’s wearing a black Adidas tracksuit with white racing stripes. We’re in his SUV, driving over the Ben Franklin Bridge in the left lane, passing traffic, and I’m clutching the oh-shit handle and staring at my lap, trying not to freak out. I’m not very good in cars. I travel everywhere by bus and subway, and this is my first time leaving Philadelphia in nearly a year. We’re traveling only ten miles into the suburbs but it feels like I’m blasting off to Mars.

“What’s wrong?” Russell asks.

“Nothing.”

“You’re tense, Quinn. Relax.”

But how can I relax when there’s this enormous BoltBus passing us on the right? It’s like the *Titanic* on wheels, so close I could reach out my window and touch it. I wait until the bus passes and I can talk without shouting.

“What about the mom?”

“Caroline Maxwell. She’s a doctor at the VA hospital. Where my sister Jeannie works. That’s how I got her name.”

“How much does she know about me?”

He shrugs. “She knows you’ve been clean for eighteen months. She knows you have my highest professional recommendation.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Don’t worry. I told her your whole story and she’s excited to meet you.” I must look skeptical because Russell keeps pushing: “This woman works with addicts for a living. And her patients are military veterans, I’m talking Navy SEALs, real f’d-up Afghan war trauma. Don’t take this the wrong way, Quinn, but compared to them your history ain’t that scary.”

Some asshole in a Jeep throws a plastic bag out his window and there’s no room to swerve so we hit the bag at sixty miles an hour and there’s a loud *POP!* of breaking glass. It sounds like a bomb exploding. Russell just reaches for the AC and pushes it two clicks cooler. I stare down at my lap until I hear the engine slowing down, until I feel the gentle curve of the exit ramp.

Spring Brook is one of these small South Jersey hamlets that have been around since the American Revolution. It's full of old Colonial- and Victorian-style houses with U.S. flags hanging from the front porches. The streets are paved smooth and the sidewalks are immaculate. There's not a speck of trash anywhere.

We stop at a traffic light and Russell lowers our windows.

"You hear that?" he asks.

"I don't hear anything."

"Exactly. It's peaceful. This is perfect for you."

The light turns green and we enter a three-block stretch of shops and restaurants—a Thai place, a smoothie shop, a vegan bakery, a doggie day care, and a yoga studio. There's an after-school "Math Gymnasium" and a small bookstore/café. And of course there's a Starbucks with a hundred teens and tweens out front, all of them pecking at their iPhones. They look like the kids in a Target commercial; their clothes are colorful and their footwear is brand-new.

Then Russell turns onto a side street and we pass one perfect suburban house after another. There are tall, stately trees that shade the sidewalks and fill the block with color. There are signs with big letters saying CHILDREN LIVE HERE—SLOW DOWN! and when we arrive at a four-way intersection, there's a smiling crossing guard in a neon safety vest, waving us through. Everything is so perfectly detailed, it feels like we're driving through a movie set.

At last Russell pulls over to the side of the road, stopping in the shade of a weeping willow. "All right, Quinn, are you ready?"

"I don't know."

I pull down the visor and check my reflection. At Russell's suggestion, I've dressed like a summer camp counselor, with a green crewneck, khaki shorts, and immaculate white Keds. I used to have long hair that fell to my waist but yesterday I lopped off my ponytail and donated it to a cancer charity. All that's left is a sporty black bob, and I don't recognize myself anymore.

"Here's two pieces of free advice," Russell says. "First, make sure you say the kid is gifted."

"How can I tell?"

“It doesn’t matter. In this town, all the kids are gifted. Just find some way to work it into the conversation.”

“All right. What’s the other advice?”

“Well, if the interview’s going badly? Or if you think they’re on the fence? You can always offer this.”

He opens his glove box and shows me something that I really don’t want to carry inside their house.

“Oh, Russell, I don’t know.”

“Take it, Quinn. Think of it like a trump card. You don’t have to play it, but you might need to.”

And I’ve heard enough horror stories in rehab to know he’s probably right. I take the stupid thing and shove it deep down into my bag.

“Fine,” I tell him. “Thanks for driving me over.”

“Listen, I’ll go wait at the Starbucks. Give me a call when you’re done, and I’ll drive you back.”

I insist that I’m fine, I tell him I can take the train back to Philly, and I urge Russell to drive home now before the traffic gets any worse.

“All right, but call me when you’re finished,” he says. “I want to hear all the details, okay?”