



BY THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *WATCH ME DISAPPEAR*

PRETTY

THINGS

A NOVEL

JANELLE

BROWN

A Novel

Pretty Things

JANELLE BROWN



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By Janelle Brown

About the Author

Even if when I met you I had not happened to like you, I should still have been bound to change my attitude, because when you meet anyone in the flesh you realize immediately that he is a human being and not a sort of caricature embodying certain ideas. It is partly for this reason that I don't mix much in literary circles, because I know from experience that once I have met & spoken to anyone I shall never again be able to show any intellectual brutality towards him, even when I feel that I ought to.

—LETTER FROM GEORGE ORWELL TO STEPHEN SPENDER, APRIL
15, 1938

Prologue

WHEN A BODY GOES DOWN in Lake Tahoe, they say, it does not rise again. The frigid temperature of the lake, its vast depths, conspire to keep bacteria at bay. What once was human fails to decompose. Instead, the body is doomed to drift along the lake bed, in perpetual limbo; just more organic matter joining the mysterious menagerie that lives in Tahoe's uncharted depths.

In death, there is no disparity.

Lake Tahoe is over a quarter mile deep and two million years old. Locals have laid claim to a fistful of superlatives: Their lake is one of the deepest in America, the purest, the bluest, the coldest, the oldest. No one really knows what's at the bottom of that water, but everyone is sure it's something dark and enigmatic. There are myths about a Loch Ness monster-like creature called Tahoe Tessie, which no one really takes seriously even though Tessie sells a lot of T-shirts. But deep-sea cameras have also captured mysterious fish on the lake bed, 1,600 feet down: creatures pale white and shark-like, evolved to withstand the near-freezing temperatures, their blood slowing to a crawl in their veins. Creatures perhaps as old as the lake itself.

And then there are other stories: Stories about how the lake was used by the Mafia as a dumping ground for its victims, back when they controlled the Nevada casinos. Stories about the Gold Rush railroad barons who considered the lake a convenient mass grave for the Chinese migrant workers they worked to death building the tracks over the Sierras. Stories about vengeful wives, cops gone bad, killing trails that led to the lake's edge and then went cold. Kids tell each other bedtime stories about corpses bumping along the bottom of the lake, eyes open, hair floating, in permanent limbo.

—

Above the surface of the lake, the snow is softly falling. Below, the body drifts slowly down, lifeless eyes lifted toward the vanishing light, until it sinks into darkness and is gone.



NINA

1.

THE NIGHTCLUB IS A TEMPLE, devoted to the sacred worship of indulgence. Inside these walls there is no judgment: You'll find no populists, no protestors, no spoilsports who might ruin the fun. (The velvet ropes out front stand sentry against all *that*.) Instead, there are girls in fur and designer silk, swanning and preening like exotic birds, and men with diamonds in their teeth. There are fireworks erupting from bottles of thousand-dollar vodka. There is marble and leather and brass that is polished until it gleams like gold.

The DJ drops a bass beat. The dancers cheer. They lift their phones toward the sky and vamp and click, because if this is a church then social media is their scripture; and that tiny screen is how they deify themselves.

Here they are: the one percent. The young and ultra-rich. Billionaire babies, millionaire millennials, fabu-grammers. "Influencers." They have it all and they want the whole world to know. *Pretty things, so many pretty things in the world; and we get them all*, says their every Instagram photo. *Covet this life, for it is the best life, and we are #blessed*.

Out there, in the middle of it all, is a woman. She's dancing with abandon in a spot where the light hits her just *so* and glimmers on her skin. A faint sheen of sweat dampens her face; her glossy dark hair whips around her face as she swivels her body to the grinding beat. The waitresses headed to the bottle-service tables have to maneuver around her, the fizzing sparklers on their trays in danger of setting the woman's hair alight. Just another L.A. party girl, looking for a good time.

Look close, though, and you can see that her half-closed eyes are sharp and alert, dark with watching. She is watching one person in particular, a man at a table a few feet away.

The man is drunk. He lounges in a booth with a group of male friends—gelled hair, leather jackets, Gucci sunglasses at night; twentysomethings who shout over the music in broken English and baldly leer at the women who careen past. Occasionally, this man will plunge his face to the table to do a line of cocaine, narrowly missing the flotilla of empty glasses that litter its surface. When a Jay-Z song comes on, the man climbs up on the seat of his banquette and shakes up a giant bottle of champagne—a rare large-format bottle of Cristal—and then sprays it over the heads of the crowd. Girls shriek as \$50,000 worth of bubbly ruins their dresses and drips to the floor, making them slip in their heels. The man laughs so hard he nearly falls down.

A waitress lugs over a replacement bottle of champagne, and as she sets it on the table the man slips his hand right up under her skirt as if he's purchased her along with the bottle. The waitress blanches, afraid to push him off lest she lose what promises to be a sizable tip: her rent for the month, at the very least. Her eyes rise helplessly to meet those of the dark-haired woman who is still dancing a few feet away. And this is when the woman makes her move.

She dances toward the man and then—oops!—she trips and falls right into him, dislodging his hand from the waitress's crotch. The waitress, grateful, flees. The man swears in Russian, until his eyes focus enough to register the windfall that has just landed in his lap. Because the woman is pretty—as all the women here must be in order to get past the bouncers—dark-featured and slight, maybe a hint of Spanish or Latina? Not the sexiest girl in the club, not the most ostentatious, but she's well dressed, her skirt suggestively short. Most important: She doesn't blink as the man swiftly shifts his attention to her; doesn't react at all to the possessive hand on her thigh, the sour breath in her ear.

Instead, she sits with him and his friends, letting him pour her champagne, sipping it slowly even as the man puts back another half-dozen drinks. Women come and go from the table; she stays. Smiling and flirting, waiting for the moment when the men are all distracted by the arrival of a tabloid-friendly basketball star a few tables over; and then she swiftly and silently tips the contents of a clear vial of liquid into the man's drink.

A few minutes pass as he finishes his drink. He pushes back from the table, working to upright himself. This is when she leans in and kisses him, closing her eyes to push away her revulsion as his tongue—a thick, chalky slug—probes hers. His friends goggle and jeer obscenities in Russian. When she can't take it anymore, she pulls back and whispers something in his ear, then stands, tugging at his hand. Within a few minutes they are on their way out of the club, where a valet jumps to attention and conjures up a banana-yellow Bugatti.

But the man is feeling odd now, on the verge of collapse; it's the champagne or the cocaine, he's not sure which, but he finds he can't object when the woman tugs the keys from his hand and slips behind the wheel herself. Before he passes out in the passenger seat, he manages to give her an address in the Hollywood Hills.

The woman carefully maneuvers the Bugatti up through the streets of West Hollywood, past the illuminated billboards selling sunglasses and calfskin purses, the buildings with fifty-foot-tall ads hawking Emmy-nominated TV series. She turns up the quieter winding roads that lead to Mulholland, white-knuckling it the whole time. The man snores beside her and rubs irritably at his crotch. When they finally get to the gate of his house, she reaches over and gives his cheek a hard pinch, startling him awake so that he can give her the code for entry.

The gate draws back to reveal a modernist behemoth, with walls entirely of glass, an enormous translucent birdcage hovering over the city.

It takes some effort to coax the man out of the passenger seat, and the woman has to prop him upright as they walk to the door. She notes the security camera and steps out of its range, then notes the numbers that the man punches into the door's keyless entry. When it opens, the pair is greeted by the shrieking of a burglar alarm. The man fumbles with the alarm keypad and the woman studies this, too.

Inside, the house is cold as a museum, and just as inviting. The man's interior decorator has clearly been given the mandate of "more is more" and emptied the contents of a Sotheby's catalog into these rooms. Everything is rendered in leather and gold and glass, with furniture the size of small cars positioned under crystal chandeliers and art clogging every wall. The woman's heels clack on marble floors polished to a mirror gleam. Through

the windows, the lights of Los Angeles shimmer and pulse: the lives of the common people below on display as this man floats here in the sky, safely above it all.

The man is slipping back into oblivion as the woman half drags him through the cavernous home in search of his bedroom. She finds it up a set of stairs, a frigid white mausoleum with zebra skin on the floors and chinchilla on the pillows, overlooking an illuminated pool that glows like an alien beacon in the night. She maneuvers him to the bed, dropping him onto its rumpled sheets just moments before he rolls over and vomits. She leaps back so that the mess doesn't splash her sandals, and regards the man coolly.

Once he's passed out again, she slips into the bathroom and frantically scrubs her tongue with toothpaste. She can't get his taste out of her mouth. She shudders, studies herself in the mirror, breathes deeply.

Back in the bedroom, she tiptoes around the vomit puddle on the floor, pokes the man with a tentative finger. He doesn't respond. He's pissed the bed.

That's when her real work begins. First, to the man's walk-in closet, with its floor-to-ceiling displays of Japanese jeans and limited-edition sneakers; a rainbow of silk button-downs in ice cream colors; fine-weave suits still in their garment bags. The woman zeroes in on a glass-topped display table in the center of the room, under which an array of diamond-encrusted watches gleam. She pulls a phone out of her purse and snaps a photo.

She leaves the closet and goes back into the living room, making a careful inventory as she goes: furniture, paintings, objets d'art. There's a side table with a clutch of silver-framed photos, and she picks one up to examine it, curious. It's a shot of the man standing with his arm flung over the shoulders of a much older man whose pink baby lips are twisted up in a moist grin, his wobbly folds of flesh tucked defensively back into his chin. The older man looks like a smug titan of industry, which is exactly what he is: Mikael Petrov, the Russian potash oligarch and occasional sidekick to the current dictator. The inebriated man in the other room: his son, Alexi, aka "Alex" to his friends, the fellow Russian rich kids with whom he pals

around the planet. The mansion full of art and antiques: a time-honored means of laundering less-than-clean money.

The woman circles the house, noting items that she recognizes from Alexi's social media feed. There's a pair of Gio Ponti armchairs from the 1960s, probably worth \$35,000, and a rosewood Ruhlmann dining set that would go for well into the six figures. A vintage Italian end table worth \$62,000—she knows this for sure because she looked it up after spotting it on Alex's Instagram (where it was stacked with Roberto Cavalli shopping bags and captioned with the hashtag *#ballershopping*). Because Alexi—like his friends, like the other people in the club, like every child of privilege between the ages of thirteen and thirty-three—documents his every move online, and she has been paying close attention.

She spins, takes stock, listens to the room. She has learned, over the years, how houses have character of their own; their own emotional palette that can be discerned in quiet moments. The way they stir and settle, tick and groan, the echoes that give away the secrets they contain. In its shimmery silence this house speaks to her of the coldness of life inside it. It is a house that is indifferent to suffering, that cares only about gleam and polish and the surface of things. It is a house that is empty even when it is full.

The woman takes a moment she shouldn't, absorbing all the beautiful works that Alexi owns; noting paintings by Christopher Wool, Brice Marden, Elizabeth Peyton. She lingers in front of a Richard Prince painting of a nurse in a bloodstained surgical mask, being gripped from behind by a shadowy figure. The nurse's dark eyes gaze watchfully out of the frame, biding their time.

The woman is out of time, herself: It's nearly three A.M. She does a last pass of the rooms, peering up into the corners, looking for the telling gleam of interior video cameras, but sees nothing: too dangerous for a party boy like Alexi to keep footage of his own misdeeds. Finally, she slips out of the house and walks barefoot down to Mulholland Drive, heels in hand, and calls a taxi. The adrenaline is wearing off, fatigue setting in.

The taxi drives east, to a part of town where the houses aren't hidden behind gates and the meridians are filled with weeds rather than manicured

grass. By the time her taxi deposits her at a bougainvillea-covered bungalow in Echo Park, she is nearly asleep.

Her house is dark and silent. She changes clothes and creeps into her bed, too tired to rinse off the film of sweat and smoke that clings to her skin.

There is a man already there, sheets wrapped around his bare torso. He wakes instantly when she climbs into bed, props himself up on an elbow, and studies her in the dark.

“I saw you kissing him. Should I be jealous?” His voice is lightly accented, thick with sleep.

She can still taste the other man on her mouth. “God, no.”

He reaches across her and flicks on the lamp so that he can examine her more closely. He runs his eyes across her face, looking for invisible bruises. “You had me worried. Those Russians don’t joke around.”

She blinks in the light as her boyfriend runs his palm across her cheek. “I’m fine,” she says, and all the bravado finally runs out of her so that she’s shaking, her whole body quivering from stress (but also, it’s true, with giddiness, with the high of it all). “I drove him home, in his Bugatti. Lachlan, I got inside. I got everything.”

Lachlan’s face lights up. “Fair play! My clever girl.” He pulls the woman to him and kisses her hard, his stubble scraping her chin, his hands reaching under her pajama top.

The woman reaches back for him, sliding her hands up across the smooth skin of his back, feeling the clench of his muscles under her palm. And as she lets herself sink into that twilight state between arousal and exhaustion, a kind of waking dream in which the past and present and future come together into a timeless blur, she thinks of the glass house on Mulholland. She thinks of the Richard Prince painting, of the bloodied nurse watching over the frigid rooms below, silent guardian against the night. Trapped in her glass prison, waiting.

As for Alexi? In the morning, he will wake up in a dried puddle of his own urine, wishing he could detach his head from his body. He will text his friends, who will tell him he left with a hot brunette, but he will remember nothing. He will wonder first whether he managed to fuck the woman before he passed out, and whether it counts if he doesn't remember it; and then, somewhat idly, he will wonder who the woman was. No one will be able to tell him.

I could tell him, though, because that woman—she is me.