



SUCH PRETTY FLOWERS

A Novel

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The Marsh King’s Daughter

K. L. CERRA



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PROLOGUE

Dane

So Maura wants to play this weird-ass game with me and I figured I'd let you know in case anything happened

I fumbled my phone onto the lip of the sink. Down it skittered, against the rust-ringed drain. *Gross*. The bathroom door swished open then, letting in the sludge of a bass line.

“There you are.” Rachel’s neck was mottled; she was almost as wasted as me. She looped an arm through mine, the ice in her vodka soda clinking. “We were starting to think you’d gotten abducted.”

I grabbed my phone and let my roommate pull me out of the bathroom. The blaze of fluorescent light in the mirror tilted out of view, sickeningly. Then the thump of the music reclaimed my body. In the belly of the bar, Rachel unwound herself from me to latch on to her fiancé, Henry, of the ruffled trust-fund hair and slight underbite. A violet tube of neon shone through the rows of alcohol bottles arranged behind the bartender. It sloped away when I tried to focus.

“So...” a male voice said.

Who was this speaking to me? *Oh, right*. The guy in houndstooth Rachel had been herding me against for the past half hour. He looked like a stock photo of *young professional*. I couldn’t think of a reason to object to

him, but I very much wanted to. He leaned forward, cupping my elbow with his palm.

“Sorry.” I squinted at my brother’s text still resting on the lock screen.

I figured I’d let you know in case anything happened

I was tapping out a string of question marks when Henry’s arm jostled me with a shot glass. He must have been feeling generous, because even Young Professional got one.

I clinked my glass against Rachel’s so forcefully a bit of vodka sloshed over the side. Rachel shrieked and gripped my shoulder, shaking with silent laughter.

“Skumps!” I cried.

It was our little inside joke, an allusion to the stupid drinking song from *Sleeping Beauty*. After Rachel had tired of teasing me for my guilty affection for Disney princesses freshman year at Emory, we’d started cheersing this way, and kept at it every weekend since. Now, in our late twenties, it was my way of retaining a through-line to Rachel, even with her fiancé and random people in our midst.

Rachel and I threw our heads back, throats undulating. Then she pulled me from the circle—and, thankfully, Young Professional—to dance. We thrust our hands skyward and grinned at each other through the haze of colored lights. Steadily, the vodka dulled the edges of the world. And I forgot to worry.

Rachel, Henry, and I took the next round of shots in to-go cups and spilled out onto the street. Henry held Rachel’s waist. Together, we tromped through square after square. Colonial building façades peered down at us, blank and solemn. Laughing, I raced ahead of the couple, feeling the brickwork against the arches of my flats. I twisted my head around and watched the gas lamps smear by. Especially when I was intoxicated, historic Savannah had a strange way of unfurling in the night. I had yet to find anything that made me feel so gloriously untethered.

When we reached Chippewa Square outside of Rachel's apartment, I slowed, approaching the lion sculptures crouched on the platform in the center. I was panting. Exhilaration—or maybe the beginning of a stitch—glittered in my side. The beasts surrounded a statue of some general thrusting his sword into the ground behind his boot. But I much preferred the lions, all four of them, their paws draped over pointy medieval shields.

“Hi, little buddies,” I whispered, reaching toward the stone manes.

Rachel came up behind me with a clobbering hug. “Slow *down*,” she whined in my ear.

That's when I finally remembered: Dane's text. I shook Rachel off and ripped my phone from my bag, feeling my heartbeat in my neck.

Shit.

I'd forgotten to hit “Send” on the string of question marks, and so of course my brother hadn't texted back.

Sometimes, I wish it had stayed that way.

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, light-colored floral or leaf-like shapes arranged in a circular pattern around the chapter title.

CHAPTER 1

Maura brought pomegranates to Dane’s funeral reception. It was an odd choice and I mentioned this to Rachel, the hard pew edge biting into my thigh.

“What’s wrong with pomegranates?” Rachel said.

I pictured a halved pomegranate. Those wreaths of slick, pink organs made my skin scuttle over my bones, just like when I looked too closely at a wasp’s nest or a strawberry. I’d googled the sensation: tryphobia. Fear of holes and circle clusters. But this felt too exhausting to explain in a whisper.

“Haven’t you heard of Persephone and Hades? Referencing eternal damnation to the underworld feels a tad insensitive, today of all days.”

Rachel’s cheek puffed. “Okay, Holly.” Her eyes were fastened on the pulpit where Maura stood.

I had no choice but to look, too.

My brother’s girlfriend was adjusting the stem of a tiny microphone. She had a face that made your mind itch as it tried to pinpoint what felt *off*. There was definitely something threading under the luminous skin. Inky princess tresses, black eyes, and sharp, birdlike bones that jutted at her clavicle. She wore a birdcage veil with pearled netting at an angle that fell a smidge short of jaunty. Seeing it—seeing her—gave me a jolt, like missing

a step on my way down a staircase. Even speaking at my brother's funeral, Maura needed to enrapture.

Dane had brought his new girlfriend to meet the family over Easter brunch, five months ago now. Back then, the two of them had been dating only a few weeks. Maura complimented the plasterwork of my childhood home in that musical voice of hers; uncharacteristically, Mom had nothing critical to say afterward. *She has polish*, was all she provided. It was undeniable: Maura had dazzled both of my parents. I think, on some level, they'd doubted Dane's ability to land a girl like her.

As I sat in the pew, my fists fizzed with heat. We'd all doubted him, and now, here we were. How would things have turned out differently had we listened? It was a cruel game I often played during the long nights after his suicide when I knew sleep was futile. What if we'd tried a little harder? Rachel told me I couldn't get swept away in what-ifs, but really, who was she to tell me that? She wasn't the one fighting the riptide, feeling like the past was a puzzle. One that maybe, put together a different way, could have kept my little brother alive.

Maura slid a piece of paper over the podium.

Rachel put a hand on my knee as Maura started speaking. To my left, my mother's shoulders rounded under her cardigan. I noticed a tiny, slack space between my dad's lips. It reminded me of the way he'd looked when he'd told me what had happened to Dane two weeks ago—like he'd lost control of the bottom half of his face. It was the first time I'd seen his dad-armor slip, and I hated it.

The paper was, it turned out, an excerpt from *Charlotte's Web*. I had no idea why she'd chosen this. If we're talking animal books, Dane had much preferred *Jumanji*, leaning toward that edge of danger evident from the very first pages. Until his symptoms became evident a few months ago, he and I had been devastatingly close. I knew his taste in books.

Maura read from the paper with the voice of a jewelry-box ballerina. The quote she had chosen was from the spider's point of view. I dug my fingertips into my thighs. Every word drove another hairline crack through me, fault lines multiplying and branching like veins. Then Maura flicked

her eyes up at me. *Saw* me. It made me feel naked, my every thought exposed, and my throat closed in response.

I surged to my feet and pushed past my family in the pew.

Rachel found me doubled over in a restroom stall. I stared at the toes of her Mary Janes under the door, seeing stars.

“Holly,” she said. “Let me in.”

“No.”

“Come on. Open up.”

I unlatched and cracked the door. Rachel handed me a cup of tepid water. I took it and wet my bristly tongue. “God, this is embarrassing,” I said.

“What are you talking about? This is your brother’s funeral. You’re allowed to be upset.”

She was right—not to mention the fact that I’d been on the opposite side of the bathroom stall for Rachel more than a few times back at Emory in Atlanta. After graduation, though, the scripts flipped. Rachel met Henry when she stayed on at Emory for grad school, and all too soon, she claimed that trifecta of adult accomplishments: a master’s degree, an apartment, a fiancé. Thankfully Henry’s family hailed from Savannah, too, so I’d jumped at the chance to reclaim my college roommate. These days, Rachel was the singular grounding force in my life. But sometimes I missed the feeling of her leaning on me, the way she had back in college.

My hand shook as I pulled the cup away from my mouth, slopping a bit onto the bathroom tile. I wanted to tell Rachel that there was something else bothering me, but I couldn’t scrounge up the words. I set the empty cup on the back of the toilet and braced my palms on my thighs.

“I still don’t get what happened to him, Rach. That time I visited him in his dorm room, I had no idea he was so sick—”

“I know.” She let out a stream of air as her eyes jumped to the bathroom door. “I know.”

Something molten leapt up my windpipe. Rachel seemed more concerned about someone walking in and witnessing my breakdown than comforting me. As a therapist, shouldn’t she have been more adept at being

—or at least appearing—present? I turned toward the toilet, feeling that heaving thing inside me. Somehow I'd managed to keep it at bay these past few days; I feared what might happen when I couldn't any longer.

Sure enough, the restroom door flapped open, making us spin. An usher with prominent marionette lines at her mouth glanced at us before turning on the sink. As she soaped her hands, I stared at Rachel, smoldering. The left side of my roommate's face jumped.

"I'm sorry," she said, when the usher left. "I know this is hard, and we can talk more about this later. Okay? You wouldn't want to miss what your brother's girlfriend has to say, right?"

"No," I relented, following Rachel out of the bathroom stall. My breath and heartbeat had smoothed by now, but my legs still felt liquid. I paused at the mirror to swipe at the bruise-colored hollows beneath my eyes. Today, their gray shade looked like an absence of color, a photograph negative. "Of course not."

—

Mom, Dad, and I were the last to leave, just as the ushers descended on the tray of picked-over cucumber sandwiches. In line to exit the parking garage, Dad drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. It took him a few tries, inserting his parking slip into the stern metal machine mouth, until our fee registered.

"Third time's the charm," he said to the parking attendant who glared down at him from her glass tower. How would she feel if she knew this man had just left his son's funeral? Would she dare look at him like that?

Mom sat silently in the passenger seat, rubbing her temples like she did when she felt a migraine coming on. As Dad eased us onto the main road, streetlights slivered in through the windows, illuminating the half-empty backseat. Dane always sat to my left. When he was little, he'd kick the back of Dad's seat during long road trips. Dad would roar, threaten to pull over and make us change seats. These days, all I saw were the gashes

that Dane had left in my life. I ran a finger around the rim of the cup holder between our seats, my throat thickening.

“Well,” Dad said, “I thought some of those speeches were really heartfelt. That kid from his class—Jordan?”

“Jacob,” Mom said. She didn’t turn to face him.

“Jacob, that’s right. Hope he’ll be coming to Dane’s showcase next month. But I didn’t see Dane’s friend Lauren. Did she make it?”

“I’m not sure.”

Silence.

“Anyway,” said Dad, trying again, “I thought the funeral home did a nice job putting everything on, didn’t you, Holly?”

“Yeah,” I said, at the same time that Mom said, “Hardly, Arthur. The food was mediocre and the sound system was unreliable. The floral arrangements were the only redeeming part of the event, and that’s only because Maura graciously stepped in and offered her services.”

Silence scorched the inside of the car again. I toyed with my split ends, made worse by the ombre dye job, and watched the road unroll in front of us like a black tarp. Soon I’d be back in my childhood bedroom. Mom and Dad hadn’t explicitly asked me to stay with them, but since I sensed they needed me, I’d spent every night there since Dane’s suicide. Each was more difficult than the last. I pictured lying in bed, looking at the asparagus-shaped shadows cast by my bedposts, feeling Dane’s closed door across the hall. I knew what was inside. Immaculately rolled clothes that still smelled like him. A bookcase crammed with alphabetized spines. An army of figurines—wizards and winged beasts—that Dane had squinted at and painted with a minuscule brush. I hadn’t set foot inside since he died, and the thought brought on that overflowing sensation again, something rising inside me like rancid dinner guts spewing past a jammed disposal.

“Hey,” I said. My voice sounded tiny. “Would you mind dropping me off at the apartment tonight?”

Both Mom and Dad spun in their seats to look at me.

“Really, honey?” Mom’s fingers fell from her temples.

“Yeah. I think I could use the change of scene. Being close to Rachel. You know.”

“Of course,” Dad said, but he was frowning.

My ribcage loosened with relief.

Dad drove into the heart of historic Savannah to deposit me at Chippewa Square. I tipped out of the car. After the over-air-conditioned funeral parlor, the September night felt lush, like a dream. A carpet of mist clung to the grass, obscuring the paving stones; oaks dripped Spanish moss from above. I brushed past the lion statues, night collecting in their open mouths.

As I approached Rachel’s apartment, the begonias in the window boxes visible from the street, I felt a swell of affection. I’d never asked just how much their rent was, but I was convinced that Rachel and Henry cut me a deal. Otherwise, there was no way I’d be able to afford a room in the heart of historic Savannah by working at the public library.

I took the stairs to the fifth floor, my fingers trailing for memorized chips in the banister. At the door, I fumbled with my keys and took in a slow breath. Something had pulled me back to Rachel’s apartment, but I still wasn’t prepared for the delicate way she would try to gauge my mood. I couldn’t even begin to fathom the small talk I’d have to suffer through with her fiancé. For now, all I wanted was to sidestep them both and burrow into the safety of my bed.

I opened the front door to an empty living room. Two stained wineglasses sat on the coffee table beside a crumpled bag of microwave popcorn. Instead of relief at the prospect of being alone, I felt another snip of rage. Had my roommate really come home from my brother’s funeral—from seeing me unravel in the stall of a public restroom—to watch a movie and eat *popcorn*?

“Rach?” I called.

The silence of the apartment pressed against my eardrums. I threw my keys down next to the wineglasses and slunk into my room. There, I

stripped down to a camisole and climbed into bed with my phone, itching for the grounding ritual of scrolling to distract myself from my grasping stomach.

At the funeral reception, I'd only managed half a deviled egg. I couldn't remember eating a full meal since Dane's death. I used to spend good chunks of time fantasizing about food: the juicy seasoned burgers in the pub around the corner from work, the silkiness of albacore nigiri on those nights I turned a blind eye to my bank balance. But these days, eating felt like an obligation. Today, I hadn't complied, and I was being punished.

I made the mistake of opening Facebook, only to see a couple posts about Dane's funeral jump to the top of my newsfeed. *RIP*. What a terrible, violent-sounding term. I stared at the screen, willing away the dam of tears behind my eyes. Sure, these people were probably well-meaning. They'd dressed up and made it to the ceremony, after all. But once they'd tapped out a status about Dane, off they'd gone, back to their sheltered lives.

I bet they all got to keep their siblings.

Muffled laughter sounded through the wall between my room and the master. A couple seconds later, a familiar rhythmic knocking started up, jostling the wire jewelry tree on my bureau. Then—I knew it was coming—Rachel's kitten-like sighs. I sank lower into my covers, burning with shame and rage. The popcorn had been bad enough. But *this*?

I pressed my eyes shut. I needed a distraction. Immediately.

I thumbed Maura's name into the search bar. A handful of common friends brought her name to the top of the list. Her Facebook page was underwhelming, so I navigated over to Instagram. *Better*. She had over a thousand photos, and I scrolled through, staring at her black eyes and sharp bones. Her prettiness felt wrong, jabbing at me like a needle.

It'd been a miracle I'd managed to evade her at the funeral. During the reception, I'd felt her presence on my neck. When she got too close, I found someone across the room to thank for coming and tore my eyes from her platter of halved pomegranates before my body could even register a shiver. Then I saw Maura approach my parents. I'd fled again to my stall in the

restroom, my heart juddering against my ribs. I'd stayed there for a long time, until I was sure she'd be gone.

Presently, the sounds behind the wall quieted. I took a gulp of air, daring to wriggle free from my cocoon of blankets.

A minute or two later, Henry opened the door to his bedroom and stepped into the hallway. I could never make out the individual words that he and Rachel spoke in their room, only the cadence of their voices. But the hallway was another story.

"Hey," he called back to Rachel. "Check out the link I sent you to that one-bedroom condo. Killer terrace. I think it might be perfect."

My heartbeat doubled in tempo. *Condo?*

Back in the master, Rachel said something unintelligible.

Henry grunted. "I know. But we're going to be married next year, Rach. It's time to start building some equity."

I rolled over onto my side. Rachel had never mentioned anything about moving out. Or buying property.

A couple beats later, Rachel's voice joined Henry's in the hallway: "... literally the day of her brother's funeral. I think we're going to have to table this for the time being."

"The hell does that even mean?" Henry's frustration sliced in past the hinges of my door. "'The time being?' Yes, what happened to her brother is tragic, it's horrible. But we can't put our lives on hold indefinitely."

Rachel's voice was soft when she spoke next. "Babe, don't take this the wrong way, but you sound like a complete dick right now."

I turned the side of my face into the pillow as rage tore through me. Yes, Henry did sound like a dick. But also, it was mortifying to hear them talking about me in this way. Like I was a child, a nuisance, something holding them back from living the life they'd been planning.

I brushed the wetness off my face with the backs of my hands and returned to my phone, reaching for what had become habitual: the last text message chain with my brother. I'd been reviewing it nightly before bed. These past couple of weeks, it was the only way I could slough off the day before falling asleep. Dane's own phone had disappeared after his suicide,

which didn't seem to surprise anyone, given his mental state back then. It still wasn't sitting quite right with me, though.

In hindsight, I realize Dane's symptoms likely started all the way back in March, but they didn't catch our attention until his graduation from Savannah College of Art and Design. Then he'd moved in with Maura, so my parents and I didn't get to see much of it firsthand. What we did see were glimpses of a gradual decline. Dane had always prided himself on his artful locks, but suddenly and without explanation, he stopped washing his hair. He fell silent, too, eyes vacant as empty nighttime homes—and it used to be near impossible to shut him up. Eventually, the paranoia began: a preoccupation with cameras in the corners of restaurants and on the sides of buildings. It wasn't until May that Dane had his first seizure one night when Maura was out meeting a client. Even now, when I imagine Dane jerking around, alone, it feels like there's a piece of driftwood skewering my heart. Dad finally convinced Dane to see a psychiatrist and a neurologist toward the end of the summer, but neither doctor had any definitive answers.

Thankfully, Dane's weird symptoms never bled into our text exchanges, which read like an extended inside joke. Take the thread three days before Easter:

Me

Easter bunny wants to know if lady-friend is attending brunch and, if so, how best to embarrass you. naked baby pics or LOTR elf costume?

Dane

Lady-friend will be in attendance. Will arrive in full Orc regalia (no need for elf cosplay)

Me

What about naked baby pics?

And that was that.

Then I scrolled down to the last chunk of texts, the last messages I ever sent and received from my brother. Even though I'd been looking at them every night, they still made my skin crawl.

The night I returned from the bar with Rachel and Henry—technically morning, at 4:42 A.M.—I was just sobering up when I got the call from my parents. Dane had been found in the townhouse he shared with his girlfriend with a steak knife cleaving the flesh from his clavicle to his navel. The investigating officers said it looked almost as if he had been trying to split himself in half. They couldn't believe he had gotten as far as he did.

That's when I'd seen the little red sun on my home screen, indicating an unread text.

Dane

Get it out get it out oh god get it out of me