

CHAPTER ONE

I drove to the doctor's office as if I was starring in a movie Phillip was watching—windows down, hair blowing, just one hand on the wheel. When I stopped at red lights, I kept my eyes mysteriously forward. *Who is she?* people might have been wondering. *Who is that middle-aged woman in the blue Honda?* I strolled through the parking garage and into the elevator, pressing 12 with a casual, fun-loving finger. The kind of finger that was up for anything. Once the doors had closed, I checked myself in the mirrored ceiling and practiced how my face would go if Phillip was in the waiting room. Surprised but not overly surprised, and he wouldn't be on the ceiling so my neck wouldn't be craning up like that. All the way down the hall I did the face. Oh! Oh, hi! There was the door.

DR. JENS BROYARD
CHROMOTHERAPY

I swung it open.

No Phillip.

It took a moment to recover. I almost turned around and went home—but then I wouldn't be able to call him to say thanks for the referral. The receptionist gave me a new-patient form on a

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clipboard; I sat in an upholstered chair. There was no line that said “referred by,” so I just wrote *Phillip Bettelheim sent me* across the top.

“I’m not going to say that he’s the best in the whole world,” Phillip had said at the Open Palm fundraiser. He was wearing a gray cashmere sweater that matched his beard. “Because there’s a color doctor in Zurich who easily rivals him. But Jens is the best in LA, and definitely the best on the west side. He cured my athlete’s foot.” He lifted his foot and then put it down again before I could smell it. “He’s in Amsterdam most of the year so he’s very selective about who he sees here. Tell him Phil Bettelheim sent you.” He wrote the number on a napkin and began to samba away from me.

“Phil Bettelheim sent me.”

“Exactly!” he yelled over his shoulder. He spent the rest of the night on the dance floor.

I stared at the receptionist—she knew Phillip. He might have just left; he might be with the doctor right now. I hadn’t thought of that. I tucked my hair behind my ears and watched the door to the exam room. After a minute a willowy woman with a baby boy came out. The baby was swinging a crystal from a string. I checked to see if he and I had a special connection that was greater than his bond with his mother. We didn’t.

Dr. Broyard had Scandinavian features and wore tiny, judgmental glasses. While he read my new-patient form I sat on a meaty leather couch across from a Japanese paper screen. There weren’t any wands or orbs in sight, but I braced myself for something along those lines. If Phillip believed in chromotherapy that was enough for me. Dr. Broyard lowered his glasses.

“So. Globus hystericus.”

I started to explain what it was but he cut me off. “I’m a doctor.”

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“Sorry.” But do real doctors say “I’m a doctor”?

He calmly examined my cheeks while stabbing a piece of paper with a red pen. There was a face on the paper, a generic face labeled CHERYL GLICKMAN.

“Those marks are . . . ?”

“Your rosacea.”

The paper’s eyes were big and round, whereas mine disappear altogether if I smile, and my nose is more potatoey. That said, the spaces *between* my features are in perfect proportion to each other. So far no one has noticed this. Also my ears: darling little shells. I wear my hair tucked behind them and try to enter crowded rooms ear-first, walking sideways. He drew a circle on the paper’s throat and filled it in with careful cross-hatching.

“How long have you had the globus?”

“On and off for about thirty years. Thirty or forty years.”

“Have you ever had treatment for it?”

“I tried to get a referral for surgery.”

“Surgery.”

“To have the ball cut out.”

“You know it’s not a real ball.”

“That’s what they say.”

“The usual treatment is psychotherapy.”

“I know.” I didn’t explain that I was single. Therapy is for couples. So is Christmas. So is camping. So is beach camping. Dr. Broyard rattled open a drawer full of tiny glass bottles and picked one labeled RED. I squinted at the perfectly clear liquid. It reminded me a lot of water.

“It’s the *essence* of red,” he said brusquely. He could sense my skepticism. “Red is an energy, which only develops a hue in crude form. Take thirty milliliters now and then thirty milliliters each morning before first urination.” I swallowed a dropperful.

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“Why before first urination?”

“Before you get up and move around—movement raises your basal body temperature.”

I considered this. What if a person were to wake up and immediately have sex, before urination? Surely that would raise your basal body temperature too. If I had been in my early thirties instead of my early forties would he have said before first urination *or sexual intercourse*? That’s the problem with men my age, I’m somehow older than them. Phillip is in his sixties, so he probably thinks of me as a younger woman, a girl almost. Not that he thinks of me yet—I’m just someone who works at Open Palm. But that could change in an instant; it could have happened today, in the waiting room. It still might happen, if I called him. Dr. Broyard handed me a form.

“Give this to Ruthie at the front desk. I scheduled a follow-up visit, but if your globus worsens before then you might want to consider some kind of counseling.”

“Do I get one of those crystals?” I pointed to the cluster of them hanging in the window.

“A sundrop? Next time.”

THE RECEPTIONIST XEROXED MY INSURANCE card while explaining that chromotherapy isn’t covered by insurance.

“The next available appointment is June nineteenth. Do you prefer morning or afternoon?” Her waist-length gray hair was off-putting. Mine is gray too but I keep it neat.

“I don’t know—morning?” It was only February. By June Phillip and I might be a couple, we might come to Dr. Broyard’s together, hand in hand.

“Is there anything sooner?”

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“The doctor’s in this office only three times a year.”

I glanced around the waiting area. “Who will water this plant?” I leaned over and pushed my finger into the fern’s soil. It was wet.

“Another doctor works here.” She tapped the Lucite display holding two stacks of cards, Dr. Broyard’s and those of a Dr. Tibbets, LCSW. I tried to take one of each without using my dirty finger.

“How’s nine forty-five?” she asked, holding out a box of Kleenex.

I RACED THROUGH THE PARKING garage, carrying my phone in both hands. Once the doors were locked and the AC was on, I dialed the first nine digits of Phillip’s number, then paused. I had never called him before; for the last six years it was always him calling me, and only at Open Palm and only in his capacity as a board member. Maybe this wasn’t a good idea. Suzanne would say it was. She made the first move with Carl. Suzanne and Carl were my bosses.

“If you feel a connection, don’t be shy about it,” she’d once said.

“What’s an example of not being shy about it?”

“Show him some heat.”

I waited four days, to spread out the questions, and then I asked her for an example of showing heat. She looked at me for a long time and then pulled an old envelope out of the trash and drew a pear on it. “This is how your body is shaped. See? Teeny tiny on top and not so tiny on the bottom.” Then she explained the illusion created by wearing dark colors on the bottom and bright colors on top. When I see other women with this color combination I check to see if they’re a pear too and they always are—two pears can’t fool each other.

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Below her drawing she wrote the phone number of someone she thought was more right for me than Phillip—a divorced alcoholic father named Mark Kwon. He took me out to dinner at Mandarette on Beverly. When that didn't pan out she asked me if she was barking up the wrong tree. "Maybe it's not Mark you don't like? Maybe it's men?" People sometimes think this because of the way I wear my hair; it happens to be short. I also wear shoes you can actually walk in, Rockports or clean sneakers instead of high-heeled foot jewelry. But would a homosexual woman's heart leap at the sight of a sixty-five-year-old man in a gray sweater? Mark Kwon remarried a few years ago; Suzanne made a point of telling me. I pressed the last digit of Phillip's number.

"Hello?" He sounded asleep.

"Hi, it's Cheryl."

"Oh?"

"From Open Palm."

"Oh, hello, hello! Wonderful fundraiser, I had a blast. How can I help you, Cheryl?"

"I just wanted to tell you I saw Dr. Broyard." There was a long pause. "The chromotherapist," I added.

"Jens! He's great, right?"

I said I thought he was phenomenal.

This had been my plan, to use the same word that he had used to describe my necklace at the fundraiser. He had lifted the heavy beads off my chest and said, "This is phenomenal, where'd you get it?" and I said, "From a vendor at the farmer's market," and then he used the beads to pull me toward him. "Hey," he said, "I like this, this is handy." An outsider, such as Nakako the grant writer, might have thought this moment was degrading, but I knew the degradation was just a joke; he was mocking the kind

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of man who would do something like that. He's been doing these things for years; once, during a board meeting, he insisted my blouse wasn't zipped up in back, and then he unzipped it, laughing. I'd laughed too, immediately reaching around to close it back up. The joke was, *Can you believe people? The tacky kinds of things they do?* But it had another layer to it, because imitating crass people was kind of liberating—like pretending to be a child or a crazy person. It was something you could do only with someone you really trusted, someone who knew how capable and good you actually were. After he released his hold on my necklace I had a brief coughing fit, which led to a discussion of my globus and the color doctor.

The word *phenomenal* didn't seem to trigger anything in him; he was saying Dr. Broyard was expensive but worth it and then his voice began rising toward a polite exit. "Well, I guess I'll see you at the board meeting to—" but before he could say *morrow*, I interrupted.

"When in doubt, give a shout!"

"Excuse me?"

"I'm here for you. When in doubt, just give me a shout."

What silence. Giant domed cathedrals never held so much emptiness. He cleared his throat. It echoed, bouncing around the dome, startling pigeons.

"Cheryl?"

"Yes?"

"I think I should go."

I didn't say anything. He would have to step over my dead body to get off the phone.

"Goodbye," he said, and then, after a pause, he hung up.

I put the phone in my purse. If the red was already working then my nose and eyes would now be pierced with that beauti-

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ful stinging sensation, a million tiny pins, culminating in a giant salty rush, the shame moving through my tears and out to the gutter. The cry climbed to my throat, swelling it, but instead of surging upward it hunkered down right there, in a belligerent ball. *Globus hystericus*.

Something hit my car and I jumped. It was the door of the car next to mine; a woman was maneuvering her baby into its car seat. I held my throat and leaned forward to get a look, but her hair blocked its face so there was no way to tell if it was one of the babies I think of as mine. Not mine biologically, just . . . familiar. I call those ones Kubelko Bondy. It only takes a second to check; half the time I don't even know I'm doing it until I'm already done.

The Bondys were briefly friends with my parents in the early seventies. Mr. and Mrs. Bondy and their little boy, Kubelko. Later, when I asked my mom about him, she said she was sure that wasn't his name, but what *was* his name? Kevin? Marco? She couldn't remember. The parents drank wine in the living room and I was instructed to play with Kubelko. Show him your toys. He sat silently by my bedroom door holding a wooden spoon, sometimes hitting it against the floor. Wide black eyes, fat pink jowls. He was a young boy, very young. Barely more than a year old. After a while he threw his spoon and began to wail. I watched him crying and waited for someone to come but no one came so I heaved him onto my small lap and rocked his chubby body. He calmed almost immediately. I kept my arms around him and he looked at me and I looked at him and he looked at me and I knew that he loved me more than his mother and father and that in some very real and permanent way he belonged to me. Because I was only nine it wasn't clear if he belonged to me as a child or as a spouse, but it didn't matter, I felt myself rising up to the challenge

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of heartache. I pressed my cheek against his cheek and held him for what I hoped would be eternity. He fell asleep and I drifted in and out of consciousness myself, unmoored from time and scale, his warm body huge then tiny—then abruptly seized from my arms by the woman who thought of herself as his mother. As the adults made their way to the door saying tired too-loud thank-yous, Kubelko Bondy looked at me with panicked eyes.

Do something. They're taking me away.

I will, don't worry, I'll do something.

Of course I wouldn't just let him sail out into the night, not my own dear boy. *Halt! Unhand him!*

But my voice was too quiet, it didn't leave my head. Seconds later he sailed out into the night, my own dear boy. Never to be seen again.

Except I did see him again—again and again. Sometimes he's a newborn, sometimes he's already toddling along. As I pulled out of my parking spot I got a better look at the baby in the car next to mine. Just some kid.

CHAPTER TWO

I was woken early by the sound of limbs falling in the backyard. I took thirty milliliters of red and listened to the labored sawing. It was Rick, the homeless gardener who came with the house. I would never hire someone to lurk around on my property and invade my privacy, but I didn't fire him when I moved in, because I didn't want him to think I was less open-minded than the previous owners, the Goldfarbs. They gave him a key; sometimes he uses the bathroom or leaves lemons in the kitchen. I try to find a reason to leave before he arrives, which is not so easy at seven A.M. Sometimes I just drive around for the whole three hours until he's gone. Or I drive a few blocks away, park, and sleep in my car. Once he spotted me, on his way back to his tent or box, and pressed his smiling, stubbly face against the window. It had been hard to think of an explanation while still half-asleep.

Today I just went to Open Palm early and got everything ready for the meeting of the board. My plan was to behave so gracefully that the clumsy woman Phillip had spoken with yesterday would be impossible to recall. I wouldn't use a British accent out loud, but I'd be using one in my head and it would carry over.