

Sometimes the people you trust are  
the ones you should be afraid of...

# HESTER YOUNG

## THE GATES OF EVANGELINE

A CHARLIE CATES MYSTERY



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## About the Book

When Charlotte 'Charlie' Cates, a journalist and single mother mourning the recent, unexpected death of her young son, starts to have dreams about children in danger, she's sure she's lost her mind.

But the disturbing images lead her from her home in suburban New York City to small-town Louisiana, where she takes a commission to write a true-crime book based on the case of Gabriel Deveau, the young heir to a wealthy and infamous Southern family, whose kidnapping thirty years ago has never been solved.

There she meets the Deveau family, none of whom are telling the full truth about the night Gabriel disappeared. And with Charlie dreaming more and more of the missing boy, she knows that time is running out and she needs to sort the truth from the lies, before it's too late.

## About the Author

**Hester Young** holds a Master's degree in English with a Creative Writing concentration from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Before turning to writing full time, she worked as a teacher in Arizona and New Hampshire. She lives with her husband and two children in New Jersey.

**HESTER  
YOUNG**

**THE GATES  
OF  
EVANGELINE**



CENTURY

*For my grandmother*

*Margaret Gibbons Young (1921-2009)*



*and her son*

*Robert Gibbons Young (1951-1956)*

But Evangeline's heart was sustained by a vision, that faintly  
Floated before her eyes, and beckoned her on through the moonlight.  
It was the thought of her brain that assumed the shape of a phantom.  
Through those shadowy aisles had Gabriel wandered before her,  
And every stroke of the oar now brought him nearer and nearer.

—HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW, *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie*



## *Prologue*

I can't pinpoint the moment I cross over. It comes slowly: the seductive darkness, my face and limbs dissolving into something weightless and fuzzy. Then consciousness spreads through me like caffeine. My senses come alive.

This time there is water. A soft *shhh*, on either side of me. I wait. Try to orient myself. Am I in a boat?

The darkness lifts, and a picture forms. Swamp. I'm in a rowboat, drifting through brown water and swirls of green scum. Around me I see dead leaves, rotted branches curling like fingers, partially submerged trees clawing their way upward. On my right, I catch a flash of movement. Watchful green eyes peer up at me. An alligator.

I drift along, trying to read the light, to get a sense of time. Morning? Evening? The swamp is sunless and dreary, offering no clues.

I feel him before I see him. Someone is with me. A small figure in a white shirt sits across from me in the boat. His face comes to me as if through mist, indistinct smudges giving way to flesh. Is it him? Is it Keegan?

Disappointment stabs me when I see the boy, not quite my son's age. He's very small, with skinny limbs. Two, maybe three years old. Pinchable cheeks and longish brown hair.

As if relieved to see me, he smiles, revealing a chipped tooth. I have the feeling that he's been waiting for me.

*Who are you?* I ask.

*Jo-Jo*, he says, as though that should suffice. When he sees my blank stare, he tries to explain. *I lived at the big white house. We had a doggie.*

I note his use of the past tense with a frown. Where *are* we? I look around for something familiar, something I might recognize, but the swampy land is foreign.

The boy's smile dissipates, and his eyes search mine. *Will you help me?*

He's so young, his voice still feeling its way around each sentence.

I swallow. Somewhere he has a mother who must love him very much.

*How?* I ask the boy. *What do you want me to do?*

He looks down at his hands, quiet for a moment. The rhythmic swishing of the water engulfs us, an eerie lullaby. *He hurt me*, the boy says finally. *You gotta tell on him.*

*Who hurt you?* I press. *If someone's hurting you, you need to tell your mom.*

*I can't!* The boy's voice rises, tearful. *He said no tellin' or he kill Mama. He kill me, maybe, too.*

I study his eyes, brown with long lashes, and the dark hair that curls at the tips, just past his chin. I must not forget about the tooth. Front tooth, chipped. Keep every detail intact. I think I understand this vision now, and he's right, he can't tell his mother.

He's already dead.

PART I

*stamford, connecticut*

OCTOBER

# 1.

THE SKY IS a dismal gray when I finally go to remove my son's car seat. It's raining, a cold autumn rain that feels both cliché and appropriate for a moment I've spent more than three months avoiding. I stand by my Prius, peering through the rear window at the empty booster seat, wondering for the hundredth time about the thin coating of mystery grit Keegan always left behind. And then I do it.

I don't give myself time to think, just proceed, quickly and efficiently. Loosen the straps. Dig into the cushions of the backseat and unhook the metal latches. One tug, and the car seat lands with a thunk on my driveway.

They never end, all these little ways you have to say good-bye. I turn my face toward the drizzle.

The summer has gone, slipped away without my noticing it, and somehow October is here, flaunting her furious reds and yellows. Squinting, I take in the houses of my neighborhood, their wholesome front yards: trim lawns, beds of waterlogged chrysanthemums, a couple of pumpkins on doorsteps. And leaves, of course, everywhere, blazing and brilliant, melting into the slick streets, clogging gutters.

I put my hand to my pocket, feel my keys and wallet. Blink. Try to remember what I'm doing, where I planned to go. Try not to think about the car seat lying behind me in the driveway.

I inhale deeply, wet earth and decaying leaves. It's Sunday, I remind myself. I'm going to see Grandma. I climb

into the driver's seat and turn on the car, but it all feels wrong. I give myself a minute, wait to see if the anxiety will pass, before conceding that I've lost this battle. I can't drive around town with that gaping void in the backseat. Not today.

*Baby steps. One thing at a time.*

I exit the car abruptly and head to the garage. Find my bike. It's Sunday, and I am going to see Grandma. I will stick to the plan. I will hold it together.

*Breathe, I tell myself. Breathe.*

"GOOD GOD, Charlotte, you're soaking." Standing in the doorway of her modest apartment, my grandmother looks uncharacteristically rattled.

"I biked."

Once, Grandma would have been impatient with my running around in the rain, inviting sickness. But life is no longer ordinary. My grandmother's granite eyes register concern, compassion even, as her gnarled hand waves me inside. I step into the foyer, dripping. Wet strings of hair cling to my forehead and neck.

Grandma peels off my jacket without comment. I can feel her watching, assessing, setting aside her own sadness to make space for mine. It's a look I first saw when I was fourteen, back when my father died and she took me in. A look that has made an unfortunate resurgence in recent months.

"There's a bathrobe somewhere," Grandma says. "Want a drink? Something hot?"

We are not a demonstrative pair. We are stoic New Englanders who maintain what my ex-husband sarcastically termed "the proper Yankee distance." Feelings, in the Cates family, are more private than politics or religion. Hot tea, a mug of cocoa—this is the kind of warmth my grandmother has to offer.

“I’m okay, Grandma. I just want to sit down.” To describe myself as “okay” is, of course, a brazen lie. My face tells the story: cracked lips, eyelids puffy from sudden crying spells, skin pale and sickly after a summer spent hidden from the sun.

It’s obvious that I am *not* okay, but Grandma says nothing. She puts a hand on my shoulder and gently ushers me into the living room. I assume my usual post on the creaky old rocker while she arranges herself in a high-backed wooden chair. My grandmother was a beautiful woman in her day, and though she’s lost most of her vanity with age, pride in her good posture has endured.

The living room is, as always, immaculate. Grandma hates knick-knacks. Her bookshelf consists largely of reference materials, although the bottom shelf holds a few guilty pleasures: some Stephen King novels, *Cold Crimes* magazine (my first steady writing gig), and old issues of *Sophisticate*, from before my promotions, back when I was a staff writer. Grandma remains a loyal reader of *Sophisticate*, although she isn’t exactly the target demographic for articles like “What You Need to Know About Prenups” and “Preparing Your Baby for an Ivy League Future.”

If my home is one of managed chaos, Grandma’s is one of enforced order. Even my son understood this, and obediently organized his books, games, and art supplies before we left here every Sunday.

“You didn’t have to come, Charlie,” Grandma murmurs. “I know it’s Sunday, but you didn’t have to come.”

“How else would I see you?” My grandmother gets around well for a woman her age, but she no longer drives, and expecting her to navigate the bus system is a little much. “Besides, it’s probably good for me to get out.”

“Did you leave your bike outside?” she asks. “It might rust.”

I shrug. “It was Eric’s bike.”

My grandmother's eyes narrow at the mention of my ex-husband. "Has he called you? Even once, to see how you're doing?"

There's venom in her words. She hates Eric with a passion I can no longer muster for his hipster glasses and ever-receding hairline. *The Sperminator*, my friend Rae took to calling him after the divorce, aptly summarizing his one lasting contribution to my life.

"Eric and I have nothing to talk about," I say. "I told him not to call." I don't bring up Melissa, his new wife, but my grandmother cannot contain herself.

"I'll never understand what he sees in that woman."

My friends made similar comments after the funeral. They all knew she was the Other Woman. I suppose they expected more: good looks, big boobs, animal prints, the kind of trashiness that might have predictably turned Eric's head. But Melissa, like Eric, was unremarkable.

"He did you a favor, really," my grandmother declares. "You don't waste caviar on a man who wants corn dogs. She's exactly what he deserves."

My whole family was outraged when Eric arrived at our son's funeral with Melissa in tow. *He has to rub her face in it*, I overheard my aunt Suzie say, and maybe that was true. Maybe, in some childish way, Eric has something to prove. I didn't care about the wife. I was angry that he showed up at all. Eric had visited Keegan only once since he and Melissa moved to Chicago. What right did he have to fatherly grief?

And still, Melissa comforted him. Held him as if the loss were his. *No*, I wanted to tell them both, *that's MY son*.

"You know, she works in waste management," I inform Grandma, suddenly ready to take what cheap comfort I can.

"That explains why she loves trash," Grandma mutters.

I manage a wobbly smile. We are Yankees. These are her love words.

TWO HOURS at my grandmother's house have, more or less, the intended effect. When it becomes clear that I don't want to talk, she fills the silence. She tells me about the small fire her elderly, somewhat senile neighbor started. She comments on a recent article in *Sophisticate*, an exposé on Botox that she reacts indignantly to. It all feels familiar. Not normal, exactly, but familiar. A life I vaguely recognize as my own.

I'm picking myself up, preparing for the return to my empty, silent house, when Grandma speaks. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

It's the closest she has come to acknowledging tragedy, and it chokes me up. I swallow and shake my head. There is nothing she, or anyone else, can do.

"I wanted to ask you ..." She gathers herself up and I can see her steeling herself, preparing to ask an unpleasant question. "The church across the street is collecting donations. They're looking for children's items, and of course, I have all these toys around ..."

It is an entirely reasonable thing for her to ask, and yet I resent it all the same.

"Did you want to hang on to them?" Grandma asks, sensing resistance in my silence. "There's no hurry."

"No, no, donate them." I know the right words, even if I don't truly feel them. "I'm sure some kid could find a use for all that stuff."

My grandmother nods and collects my wet coat. I'm halfway out the door and headed for the elevator when she calls after me. "Charlotte?"

I turn.

"Do you dream about him?"

It's an odd question.

"I never dream," I tell her. "Ever. Do *you* dream about him?"

She shakes her head. "Sometimes I wish I did." She blows me a kiss, a gesture I find unexpectedly tender. "Be



careful riding home.”

THAT NIGHT, sprawled across the couch in the dark, I wait for my sleeping pills to kick in. Even before I lost Keegan, I needed pills. Now I need more. *Charlie's only off switch*, Eric used to joke, and it's true.

My body goes slack. My mind swirls. I'm on my way out.

*Mom*. From behind me, I swear I can hear Keegan's voice. *Mommy, are you listening?*

I try to sit up, but Ambien is pulling me under, filling my head with nothing.

*You have to listen, Mommy. It's time to start listening.*

The last thing I'm aware of is the sweet smell of his shampoo, his curls tickling my face. Then the drugs take me away.

## 2.

WHEN MY FRIEND Rae shows up with an eggplant dish her husband made, I know exactly what play she's running. It's a move I've grown accustomed to. The food gets her inside, where she guilts me into eating *just a little, so I can tell Mason you tried it*. Then, as I dutifully pick at her husband's cooking, she tackles chores around my house.

In the beginning, her little check-ins drove me nuts. I wasn't hungry. I didn't *want* my laundry done. Dishes were beside the point. Now I realize the neighborly love behind the visits, understand the time Rae and Mason set aside each week for me, and I'm grateful—though they still drive me nuts.

Today, I don't even have time to retrieve a spoon before she's attacking my kitchen, poking a broom into the dark crevices beneath the fridge and dishwasher. I'm in no mood for it.

"Would you *stop* cleaning, damn it? The house is fine."

She sets the broom down slowly. Sighs. Sucks in her cheeks and runs a fingernail up and down her long brown throat. "Just trying to take something off your plate." Her gaze slides around my kitchen: its sticky counters, my ever-growing mound of mail, the overflowing garbage.

I know that she wants to help, wants to bring light or at least some Pine-Sol into my cave of misery, but Rae doesn't know this mess like I do. She sees smudgy sliding glass doors, and I see my son's fingerprints. She sees an old

Cheerio, and I see a breakfast when he sat with me, fidgeting, complaining, dawdling.

“So what did Mason make today?” I ask, peeling back the tinfoil on her casserole dish. “It looks good.”

“Eggplant rollatini.”

I have an obligatory spoonful. “Tell him I like it,” I say, although it tastes like nothing to me, the way everything does now. “Did Zoey help? Is she still talking about being a chef?”

“Nah, she’s back to ballerina again.” Rae fiddles with one of her springy Afro curls and then changes the subject, as she usually does these days when I ask about her daughter. “So, Charlie, honey,” she begins, “I have to ask. Are you seeing somebody?”

I’m confused. “You mean a boyfriend?”

“I mean a therapist. A grief counselor.”

I wave a hand dismissively. “I have pills, I’m fine.”

Rae squints at me. “Pills are good. But maybe you need to *talk* to someone, too. You’ve got a lot to sort through. Most of us can’t do that alone.”

The thought of explaining myself to someone, giving name to my feelings—it’s exhausting. “I’ll figure it out.”

“I know you will,” she says, softening. “You’re the strongest person I know. Maybe *too* strong. It’s okay to be a blubbering mess for a while.”

“For a while?” I give a shaky laugh. “I don’t think I’ll ever stop.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Rae crosses the room and envelops me in the kind of rib-crushing hug my grandmother and I could never exchange. “This is your low. This is your rock bottom. I don’t know when and I don’t know how, but you’ll get through this. And you’ll kick life in the balls just as hard as it’s kicked you. Remember when you found out Eric was cheating?”

The question, I assume, is rhetorical. It was not the sort of moment you’d forget. Eric took me to a restaurant for a

so-called date night and, shortly after our appetizers arrived, began his dramatic confession. *Charlie*, he said, gazing into the distance like a character on a soap opera, *I did something terrible.*

Two years after the fact, it still makes my blood boil. “He wanted me to make a scene,” I tell Rae. “That freaking drama queen.”

“Oh, I’d have punched him,” Rae says. “But you didn’t. You held it together. Because you’re a tough-ass bitch.”

I shrug. My anger that day was with myself just as much as Eric. Because I should have known, should have seen the affair coming. Our marriage had been on the rocks since Keegan’s birth, and I never mistook Eric for a model of moral virtue. I just didn’t think he’d get the opportunity.

*We’ve had problems for a long time*, Eric said, delivering a speech that was clearly rehearsed. *But we can get past this. For Keegan. Our son needs us.*

He expected tears, a choice between two women, but I remained calm, determined not to follow the script. *No*, I corrected him through a mouthful of crab, *our son needs me. I want primary custody. And if you do anything to fight me on this—anything at all—I will have you paying child support out your ass for the next sixteen years. This can be hard, or this can be easy.*

In the end, he made it easy. For me, but mostly for himself.

I want to tell Rae that I’m not tough, just dumb to have married an asshole like Eric in the first place, but I can’t regret Eric. Because I could never regret my son.

“Listen,” Rae says, “I better go. You hang in there, Charlie-girl. One day at a time.”

She doesn’t tell me that she’s going to pick up Zoey, but it’s Thursday. Zoey has dance on Thursdays. I haven’t forgotten. As I watch her drive away, I wonder if our friendship can survive this. Can I forgive Rae? She has somewhere to go. She has a child waiting.

THAT EVENING I get a call from Bianca, my art director at *Sophisticate*. I mute the TV, some program I wasn't really watching about ancient Egyptians, and answer my cell, grateful for the distraction of work.

"Hon, how *are* you?" I'm used to Bianca enthusing over beautiful layouts and agonizing over the font and color of text. Discussing my personal life is another story.

"I'm fine," I say cautiously. "You?"

"Good, good." Bianca doesn't linger on niceties. "So listen ... I wanted you to be the first to know." She takes a deep breath. "Dunhaven's looking to sell the mag."

The TV casts eerie blue shadows across the wall of my living room. I stare at the images of mummies and ancient tombs, trying to absorb her words. Bianca and I have never exactly been a fan of our publisher, but a sale could mean a massive, catastrophic shake-up at work. This is a big deal, a very big deal, and yet I can't quite summon the energy to get riled up.

"Huh," I say.

My response is not what Bianca anticipated. "Look," she says, "I'm not supposed to say anything, but Longview Media's already made an offer. It could be accepted as early as next week."

"You think they'll restructure?" I ask.

"I can guarantee it," she says. "I know you've been working a lot from home these last few months, but that's not gonna fly with Longview. I'm telling you this as a friend, Charlie. Starting next week, you make it to the office *every day*, okay? Because heads are going to roll. And you know how bad Tina wants your job."

"Okay," I tell her, and in some distant way I do appreciate that she's looking out for me. "Thanks for the heads-up."

After our call, I sit staring at the phone, wondering why I'm not more concerned about the job I spent most of my adult life chasing. *Twelve years*, I realize in disbelief. I began working for the magazine at twenty-six. Once I

determined my stint at *Cold Crimes* magazine was going nowhere, I started freelancing for *Sophisticate* until they offered me a staff writer position. *Sophisticate* was a complete 180 from writing about old murders and advances in forensics, but it was a steady job and paycheck. Now, many years and several promotions later, I am managing editor and I have an amazing career. Right?

An amazing career and almost no social life. Hardly any family. And no son.

I wander into the bathroom, in search of my Ambien. Kick aside a heap of mildewed towels, ignoring the smell. Pry the lid off my pill bottle.

Would losing my job really be a bad thing? For years, I've dedicated myself to a magazine that promises today's affluent professional woman a life of happiness and ease. But where is *my* happiness? *My* ease?

I slip myself an extra sleeping pill. I don't want to think anymore, don't want to remember what I've lost. Don't want to ask myself where I would be without my job now, too.

*DING, DING, DING.*

I'm jolted from my medicated fog by the doorbell. I sit up on the couch, head pounding, stomach lurching. An Ambien hangover. That's what happens when you double the recommended dose.

The doorbell rings again, three times in quick succession. It's a sound I haven't heard in a while. Zoey. Her "secret" ring for Keegan.

In the last few months, Rae has kept her daughter's visits to a minimum, and I don't blame her. I'm still fragile, unprepared to deal with Zoey's relentless questions. How do you explain to a kindergartener that her playmate is dead when you yourself can't fully grasp the implications of that word? I consider ignoring the doorbell altogether, but

I've known Zoey most of her life. I love her to pieces. She is the only child I have left in my life.

I open the front door and blink away the morning sunshine. Zoey's face tilts up toward me; she's a tiny, even more gorgeous version of Rae. Smooth coffee skin, strictly managed curls. A fashionista in training. Rae stands behind her, hesitant. I have no doubt that she's coached her daughter thoroughly, but Zoey's only five, still a bit of a wild card.

"Hi-hi!" Zoey studies me. "Are you sick?"

"Zoey." Rae's tone is a warning.

"I came to show you my new outfit." She holds out the skirt of a lime-green ensemble and spins around for me.

I kneel down to her level. "It's beautiful."

"She wanted to say hello," Rae murmurs. "I hope you don't mind."

"No, I'm glad you came by." I glance at the living room clock. "Looks like I overslept."

"We'll let you get started on your day." Rae puts a hand on Zoey's shoulder, attempting to steer her child away. "We need to go too, baby. Time for school."

Zoey glances back at me. "Hey, wanna come to my dance show? It's gonna be really good."

Her mother obviously didn't anticipate the invite.

"Charlie's really busy. Maybe another time."

Is she protecting me, I wonder, or shielding Zoey? "Are you having a recital, Zo?" I ask. Even before I lost Keegan, I envied Rae for her daughter, the princess dresses, purple tutus, and glitter paint. I haven't been to either of Zoey's recitals since she started lessons.

Zoey beams at my interest. "Yeah, we're having a show. And I get a costume. It's *really* pretty."

"Wow," I say. "I'd love to go."

Zoey hugs my knees.

"Are you sure?" Rae looks dubious, like she doesn't think I can hold myself together.

“Of course.”

“The recital is Sunday afternoon. I could pick you up at three.”

I can tell that she’s still not convinced.

“If Sunday gets here and you don’t feel like it, no biggie.”

I attack Zoey with tickle fingers, ignoring her mother. Zoey squeals in delight.

“I’ll see you on Sunday, sweetie. I can’t wait.”

“Yaaay!” She does a celebratory dance, and her joy is so innocent and pure, I think my heart will break.

IN THE FORTY-EIGHT HOURS BEFORE Zoey’s recital, I become strangely agoraphobic. The idea of leaving the house fills me with panic. Can I really smile and applaud as I watch other people’s children on display? Fueled by my anxiety, I stop lazing around the house and start cleaning. It’s time. Objects are not the same as memories, I remind myself. My son is more to me than a Ninja Turtle backpack and a hallway littered with Matchbox cars.

I put away all of Keegan’s toys, stacking puzzles and games on shelves, packing blocks and Legos away in boxes. I make his bed, wash and fold his clothes, alphabetize his books. These items mean nothing now to anyone but me. I am the only one who remembers the seven thousand times we read *Moo*, *Baa*, *La La La!* and the games of Candy Land he shamelessly cheated at. There are no new memories to be made.

When I am through, the room is neat and impersonal. Blue walls, green trim, a *Sesame Street* bedspread. It looks like an IKEA display, a room waiting to be filled by some anonymous little boy, not my little boy, but someone else’s.

Afterward, I turn on the shower, step in with all my clothes on, and sit down. I cry. Cleaning has never felt this bad.

In these two days, I stop taking sleeping pills. I don’t want to check out, don’t want to numb myself. I need to



feel. Sleep, without pharmaceutical aid, has always been elusive; now it's an impossibility. At night, I leave the TV on, letting the enthusiastic voices of infomercials keep me company. I clean out the refrigerator, attack the bathroom tiles with a toothbrush. I cringe with self-loathing as I go through past issues of *Sophisticate*, the articles on diets and plastic surgery. I think, *At least I never had a daughter to screw up.* A cold comfort indeed.

ON SUNDAY, I sit on the couch and wait. This is it. My day to look normal, to fake it as best I can. Sunlight filters weakly through the curtains. I hear birds. Days and nights without sleep finally take their toll, and before I know it, I'm gone.

Birds, first. Crows squabbling, the light receding, then red. Red flowing, rippling, shimmering. I dip my hand in it and watch fabric spill from my fingers. Someone giggles. I peel back layers of red and Zoey emerges, sequins falling from her hair. *I'm not ready*, she sings to me, *I'm not ready for the end*. Suddenly she's dancing. Spinning, twirling, leaving me nauseous with all her circles. *I'm not ready*, she sings, *I'm not ready for the end*. I reach for her, trying to steady her, but a curtain descends. Not my green curtains, but black curtains, crushing in their weight. Now Zoey is gone, swallowed in their black folds, screaming.

*Zoey!* I exclaim. *Zoey!*

*My ankle*, she whimpers from beneath the black. *My ankle*.

I awake to Rae shaking me. "Charlie? It's time to go. You still wanna come?"

Head throbbing, I try to remember where I am. "Where's Zoey? Is she okay?"

"Mason drove her over early."

The sun has shifted, leaving the room to the afternoon's advancing shadows. "What about her ankle? Is it broken?"

"Zoey? She's fine, hon. There's nothing wrong with her ankle." Rae leans against the arm of the couch, trying not

to stare at her watch. "Are *you* okay? You look like you could use some more sleep."

"Was I sleeping?"

"I think you were dreaming."

"Oh." I sit up and rub my face, though I'm more uneasy than tired. "Let's go, then."

THE RECITAL IS BEING HELD at the local elementary school, in a musty auditorium with a drooping flag. When I look at the program, I realize Zoey's class is just one of eight performing. As the youngest group, they go first, and then appear again in the finale.

Mason sees my look of consternation and tries to reassure me. "It goes fast," he promises.

I like Rae's husband, but I know bullshit when I hear it.

The first number goes as expected. The curtain opens, and Zoey and her compatriots scuttle out in red sequined leotards. Dazed by the floodlights, the children form two haphazard lines and perform a dance so jerky and out of sync they look like marionettes.

Once Zoey leaves the stage, my mind wanders. I watch restless audience members move in and out of their seats, count the number of glowing cell phones set to record. I pick at the chipped varnish on my wooden seat, trying to tune out the rustling jackets and programs. The performances drag on until finally we reach the last number, some wretched pop song about a girl resisting her boyfriend's attempts to dump her. *Boy, you got to believe that / I ain't ready for you to leave yet*, she croons.

The routine begins with older girls while the little ones line up in the wings. Rae touches my shoulder and points to Zoey, who peeks out from behind the curtain, oblivious to the fact that everyone can see her.

"Uh-oh," Rae whispers. "She's going to miss her cue!"

And it does look that way. Lips moving like she's singing, Zoey twirls and grabs a handful of curtain. She leaps up,

trying to sail through the air like she's Tarzan on a vine,  
and—

Collapse.

A mess of black fabric crashes down, engulfing her.

Over the tinny speakers, the music reaches a dreadful crescendo. *I'm not ready*, the singer moans, *I'm not ready for the end*.

I see Rae leap to her feet. I see a woman hurry out from backstage. I see Mason push his way past unyielding laps and knees and footwear, trying to get to the stage.

The music continues, its chorus familiar and horrible, as confused dancers wonder whether or not to carry on with the show: *I'm not ready, I'm not ready for the end*.

Someone has pulled Zoey from the curtain, a competent-looking man. She's crying. He talks to her patiently, touches her leg, locating the source of her pain. She points, and I feel a dark thrill of recognition at this final, inexorable detail.

Because, of course, it's her ankle.

### 3.

THAT NIGHT, I try to drown out the noise in my head with more noise. I turn up the radio, run the garbage disposal, vacuum. None of this does anything to shake my sense of foreboding, but I prefer a pounding anxiety to quiet dread. At some point after eleven, Rae appears in my living room. I switch off the vacuum, startled to see her at this hour.

"I knocked," she says. "I don't think you could hear me." She looks around the newly tidy house, eyebrows raised. "Wow. This place looks good."

"How's Zoey?"

Rae rolls her eyes. "We just got back from our whole emergency room odyssey. She'll be fine." She slumps down onto the couch, her thigh landing on Keegan's Popsicle stain from last June. "I saw your light was on, so I figured I'd stop by. Glad you made it home."

"I took a taxi. It wasn't a big deal. So ... did Zoey get crutches?"

She nods. "She loves them. We practically had to wrestle her into bed." She leans back against the couch, peering at me sideways. "It was broken, by the way. Her ankle."

"I guess that's lucky. It could've been a lot worse." I don't say how much worse, and Rae isn't thinking of the son I lost, not now.

"It's weird, isn't it? How you dreamed it?" She watches me closely.

I've been a queasy bundle of nerves the last few hours, turning it over in my mind, but I don't want her to know

that. Rae is completely superstitious. She believes in *everything*. Ghosts and past lives and tarot cards—all that crap. I don't want her to believe in *this*.

"It was just a dream, Rae. I don't think it means anything."

"You woke up from your nap asking if Zoey's ankle was broken," Rae persists. "That totally means something!"

"You're right," I say with an eye roll. "I'm basically one step short of Nostradamus. I'll give you a call when I start dreaming about lottery numbers, okay?"

"You get to work on that, I'm not even playing!" She stretches her legs, as if amused by my skepticism. "I better get to bed. Thanks for coming to Zoey's recital, even if it did turn out crazy."

I follow her outside, watching from my driveway to see that she arrives safely at her house. It's a cold night, the kind of cold that feels clean when you inhale it. I cross my arms, shivering. Rae waves from the brick walkway of her yard as Mason opens the front door for her. She's made it. She's safe.

I step inside and lock the door behind me. I don't usually keep things from Rae, don't want to add to the distance between us now, but I can't tell her everything. Because it wasn't just the ankle. It was the red sequins, the black curtain. That awful song. I don't know what this means, not yet, and so I stuff it somewhere deep with all the other things I'm trying not to think about and I vacuum. I dust. Wash the kitchen floor and make beds.

Some time after four a.m., I survey my house and discover that for the first time in the five years I've owned it, my home is clean. Nothing-left-to-do clean. Bianca was right. It's time to return to work.

I WORK WITH A LOT OF WOMEN. There's a handful of gay men, and presumably a straight guy buried somewhere in the ranks, but for the most part, *Sophisticate* runs on a very

specific type of estrogen: bitchy, hypereducated New Yorker.

In my twenties, I loved it. That was who I aspired to be. By thirty, I had perfected the wry smile, the raised eyebrow, the long and jaded sigh. I could argue about which bagel joint on the Upper West Side was best, pay eight dollars for half an avocado without batting an eye. I jogged through Central Park and thought I was communing with nature. The city wore on me, though. One day in a restaurant I saw my reflection and thought, *I never smile. I smirk.*

I was only too ready to escape when I met Eric, my knight in shining argyle, my ticket out. We dated just five months before marrying. Three months later, I was pregnant. Stamford, Connecticut, isn't as ritzy as Greenwich or Darien, but we found a cozy three-bedroom just a few miles from my grandmother's assisted-living facility. Even after Eric left, I loved my home. I'd watch Keegan digging in the sandbox or splashing in his kiddie pool and my heart would rise up in my chest with happiness—until the morning's long commute back into Manhattan.

On this dreary Monday, I walk the dozen blocks from Grand Central, feeling too claustrophobic for the tightly packed bodies of the subway. Between hulking skyscrapers, I catch fragments of sky and swirling clouds. Hair whipping around my face, I fight my way through wind tunnels, kick away blowing trash. None of the other pedestrians look at me, and I wonder how many people I've passed, how many faces I've ignored over the years.

I'm doing the best impression that I can of Charlie Before, but the whole sideswept-bangs-to-hide-the-grow-out thing isn't working this morning and my trousers are a bit wrinkled from the month they spent dangling from a shower rod. Truth be told, I have my doubts about *Sophisticate*. After all that I've been through, can I really muster up any enthusiasm for a magazine that is, if I'm being honest, an upmarket, slightly less sex-obsessed