

The air felt like breath against her bare legs, and Laure couldn't concentrate at all. Naomi's voice was marching on, trying to feed her imagination on wide celestial spaces, or tides rolling in, or long stone flights of steps. But repetitions of her day just kept flicking up instead, random, unriddable flashes. Practicing fainting in her living room. Sinking bright herbal teabags in Styrofoam cups of hot water. The set of Connor's jaw while he read. So many hours did she spend facing him that even on her way out of consciousness, she could still see the shadows under his eyes.

This was okay. This was how it went at first.

Laure used to be quick to blame herself for how long it took her to go under. She thought her consciousness was stubborn and perverse, which it probably was, or that she lacked imagination. A hypnotist was offering visions and instead she was listing all the things she had to pick up at the store: milk, bacon, eggs. It was time to cook for her father soon. At breakfast and lunch Bartholomew scrounged for himself, but at dinner he ate the pancakes his daughter made. Five pancakes and three strips of bacon, and whiskey and orange juice until he fell asleep. She made everything in batches and stashed one meal per Ziploc bag in his freezer. As a kid, it was just one of her wrong ideas about the place her father came from that there, they all ate pancakes every night. Laure had lots of misconceptions about Nashop. Like that there were elephants, for one thing. She couldn't explain why she'd thought, as a child, that wild elephants roamed the Caribbean, or how much it smarted when she found out the idea was absurd.

Bartholomew didn't have an accent, not really. Just enough Jamaican cadence to remind you he hadn't been born here, that his fine suits had been bought with the sweat of righteous hard labor, et cetera. He once told Connor that he'd been born in a blue house the width of a mattress and the length of the width of a street. So you could see how it went to his head, a little. Once he had a booming business and a new house to move his mother into and a daughter named Laure Goodson.

Laure Goodson

(Her name was, in fact, one of Bartholomew's favorite parts of his daughter. He was proud, of course, of her poise and her beauty, that frame like a stretched-out Greek goddess, all gifts he could lay little claim to. But he had given her her name, a single spring-rain syllable that held more Paris and Manhattan than any other he could think of.)

A deep good feeling broke over Laure, rich and disconcerting. But she didn't know it. She'd finally lost awareness. Her muscles dropped. If anyone had been around, they'd've seen a strip of white fluting at the base of her almost-closed eyes. But Laure was alone on the fifth-floor balcony of her apartment alone, leaning back in an Adirondack chair, facing the mammoth highways that glinted with traffic in the valley below.

It was the first apartment she'd lived in by herself. She'd gotten within the last year, with her father's money mostly. She still thought of it as new, though the building was older than the house her mother and grandmother still lived in. When Bartholomew decided to move Laure to Hollywood the year she turned sixteen, it had gone without saying that her mother would stay behind to take care of her mother-in-law. Her mom didn't object, as far as Laure knew. Sissa may have been a city girl from Kingston, but she still knew what good wives did for their husbands' mothers. Laure didn't question the arrangement, either, though she knew as well as anyone that her grandmother wasn't really sick. It was just the shock, was all, of being moved to her son's plaster-and-plastic house in Seattle after living seventy years in a village where you ate what your garden grew and dogs and roosters fought in the street. Laure grew up fascinated by her grandmother, watching her shuffle mutely around in her yellow flip-flops. She could spend hours just imagining what it must've been like to grow up when girls got married early and got pregnant with the unrelent of rain, and old men walked to market moving slower than an elephant's heart.

It could make her own life seem strange and insubstantial, by comparison. Laure was twenty and barely cooked, raised no children, spent just minutes of her day outside compared to the hours and hours in Connor's office. They'd spent the past six months chasing down a single role, practicing and calculating and obsessing, which seemed ridiculous in the context of her

grandmother's life. Yet it had been grueling enough. Laure loved the chance to play a key, complex character, because more than anything else in her waking life she loved becoming someone else. But the endless doubts she had about the way she delivered every line, the numberless questions she asked herself and endless faults she accused herself of, could turn into a hornets' drone that scattered her thoughts to hell. That was where the hypnosis came in. Laure found that once Naomi had lulled her into a state of she hardly knew what, she could finally *concentrate*. She used hypnosis to rehearse: rehearse scenes, rehearse meetings with directors, rehearse her own bearing. In her head she really was in the Egypt of pharaohs, upright in the heat, scented oil wetting the backs of her ears. In her head she was already giving interviews, a star.

The show was called *The Prophesied*, an Ancient Egyptian palace drama with a supernatural twist. For most of the first season Laure was just a slave-girl, a subplot with a scene here and there. But the finale revealed that she was the queen's bastard daughter. In the next seasons, if they got picked up, she would be a major character. She'd seen spec scripts for season two. The writers had Laure stricken and weeping, naked, commanding, weaving between fear and confrontation. She'd never been asked to do anything like it. Till then she was an extra in a superhero movie, a grim and silent nurse, a secretary with two lines.

"Shoulders back," Connor had told her the morning of the first day of shooting. "Knock it out of the park."

"Shoulders back'?" she repeated, trying to sound glib. "That's your advice?"

"Yes," he said. "Play up your height. It makes you look Egyptian."

"People were actually a lot shorter back then."

"But people think of Egyptians as tall," he said. "Go."

Among the cast, more careers than Laure's stood to be made. A lot of the actors were unknowns, but the director was famous. He'd taken a gamble on the project, though a gamble he could afford to lose, while the sense in the dressing rooms was of stakes so high they just had to pay off. No one said the words "big break." But Laure thought them all the time, sometimes

found herself chant-thinking *break break break*, because that was what she needed, wasn't it? To break, pummel herself, do crack the shell and let out the yolk. She was willing to try anything. She was willing to get hypnotized over the phone, watching waves of traffic glitter until her eyelids fell, let her mind wander out and return with strange thoughts she wasn't sure she wanted and couldn't begin to guess where she'd found. But lately, Laure was less and less inclined to be skeptical of any work Naomi did. It had gotten her this part.

Shooting for the first season had wrapped, and the first episodes had started to air. To see Bartholomew in front of the TV during her short scenes, you'd think his daughter really had fulfilled some prophecy. It wasn't true that he had been planning just such a thing since her birth. But it was true that from the moment saw that light skin stretched across his daughter's newborn body, he'd known anything was possible. A new feeling had entered his chest then, less intention than hope, smarting like champagne.

Laure's eyes snapped open to a brightness that made them water. The light came off the cars below in flashes that she imagined she could feel cooking her, seeping right into her skin. It was just like her stubborn self, Laure thought, to fight her own desire to go under. But she also knew by then that Naomi was nudging her halfway awake at a certain points throughout the sessions. She had to: if Laure didn't regain some level of awareness, she'd never be able to rehearse. But that afternoon, Laure didn't feel like working. She could hear Naomi prompting her, saying, "Note what's around you. Are you outside or inside?" But she ignored her. She wanted to float in her thoughts and memories, or failing that in a big, warm lake, because if this was what drugs were like she understood why people did them, and if this was what being in love was like she was more heartsick than ever. She curled on her side, a teenager refusing to get out of bed, and breathed in the rattling breath that she'd been forgetting to take.

Laure loved the heat. She could sit out in it forever. She was a warm-blooded creature, she used to say, till she realized it's actually cold-blooded lizards and things who love to lie in the sun. If *The Prophesied* got picked up, they were going to go do some shooting in New Mexico.

She couldn't wait. She'd have to buy some turquoise jewelry for the trip, though, when she thought about it, it'd make more sense to buy turquoise there. Next time she saw Connor she'd ask him when they left. He knew her schedule better than she did. Naturally. They bowed their heads together over stacks of headshots and decided which showed her cheekbones best; she practiced lines on him. At each other's doors they knocked, but rarely waited for an answer. He was one of those men who made eye contact the whole time he talked to you, and if Laure, who when it came down to it knew so few people, who spent her days standing in front of cameras in dresses she couldn't wear a bra with, pretending not to feel like a child— if she couldn't help thinking, help imagining—

She'd meant to notice whether Connor seemed to notice the strapless plum dress she wore to the premiere. But that night wound up bewildering Laure. As soon as she stepped onto the carpet (which was actually midnight blue, and not red), she was suddenly alone in front of a cordon of press. A lipsticked reporter snapped her up, and almost the first question she asked was whether shooting her first show had been hard. Laure, who already felt like she was moving through an alien world, was thrown off by the question. "I— um. It's hard, but I want it to be hard. And everyone really supported each other and learned a lot and, yeah. I don't know. The day I got the part was the best day of my life." She smiled. They filmed it. But as she walked away, Laure wondered whether she'd really heard the question right. Surely that couldn't be the kind of thing they asked at these gown-and-tux events, whether it was hard?

(Once, while they were shooting, one of the big lights came unrigged and swung down and clocked her right in the head. It sent her flying, stunned out of speech, and though she would turn out not to need stitches, it looked awful, *sounded* just awful—that percussive thud of a head getting hit—and for a minute, her vision swam. She remembered Connor, though, barreling toward her before the director could say 'cut.' Connor, kneeling beside her in a motion the last half of which seemed a stagger. "Christ," he'd said, and grabbed her hand. "Okay, sweetheart, it's okay.")

Laure expected to feel relieved when she got past the press and into the hotel restaurant where the premiere party was being held. But inside, it just got worse. She had been picturing tables with place cards, a progression of courses and speeches to bob effortlessly in the wake of. But when she opened the door she found a crowd on its feet, all weaving around with drinks in their hands. Bartholomew was across the room, talking with two important-looking men. Temporarily stunned, Laure stood still. For a whirlwind second she was caught in the hug of a fellow slave-girl, who then ran off with two guys who thought they were being subtle as they mouthed *Coke?* across the ballroom, collars unbuttoned, black puckish eyes. Who were all these people? A passing waitress offered champagne, which Laure shook her head to, then wished she'd accepted for the sake of something to hold. She was crossing the room too quickly and would be at the end of it soon. And then while she stood there losing it in a sea of people who weren't him, Connor walked in the door. Hands in his pockets, kink in his nose. She didn't even have to go to him, go hang on his heels like a puppy, because he was already headed her way, the most natural thing in the world.

And Connor did notice the dress, as it happened. He was an observant man, who also noticed the look on Laure's face, like a lioness about to maul him, he remembered thinking, though she was standing so still and seemed so glad to see him. Later that night, as he watched Bartholomew prowl across the room, Connor thought that maybe here was the reason he associated Laure with lions. Her father was one of those men whose back, you just knew, was rolling and hairless, powerful even after falling out of a young man's shape. When he walked beside his daughter, who stood a full head taller, Bartholomew did not look absurd.

It was striking, how little they looked alike. Besides the fact that he was so much darker, their coloring was different, his undertones purple where hers were gold. Her looks were such a curveball that some fathers might just have wondered. But Bartholomew knew exactly when Laure was conceived. It was during O.J., that first day, when he ran. When news of the murder had first come out, Bartholomew assumed the football star was guilty and hoped he went to jail,

to the extent he thought about it at all. But then, the miracle happened. Bartholomew's cousins were over at the time, which when he looked back he was thankful for, since if he'd been alone and sober he might not have seen it properly. But the three of them were drinking beer in plastic chairs in Bartholomew's dice-sized back yard, watching kids in the distance turn water guns on each other. And then all of a sudden the neighbors, whom Bartholomew and Sissa barely spoke to, but still, the neighbors were actually *screaming* over the fact this motherfucker seemed to have gotten in a Bronco and gone. He was the only black man in America the police wouldn't have shot as he lurched down a freeway that had shut down before him. It was all so impossible that it seemed no less likely to think he might actually make it to Mexico, or veer right into the Pacific and drive off to the Promised Land in his white SUV along rocks that would rise up to meet him. Nobody'd have believed it if it weren't on their TVs, and people poured outside to tell each other what everyone already knew, wearing out their voices with complicated, uncomplicated joy. At some point his cousins got lost in the crowd, and Bartholomew went inside and found his wife and although they were always so careful, neither one of them wanting an abortion or a baby, they were not careful then.

(Connor never did forget the sight of Laure cooking all that food for Bartholomew. Every other Saturday he'd walk into her kitchen to find her elbow-deep in a hundred pancakes' worth of batter. Dismissive when he praised her filialty. Flour specking her hands and forearms, kitchen henna.)

A year ago, when Bartholomew went back to Nashop, Connor had assumed Laure would go too. But he didn't ask his daughter, or wife, or mother to accompany him. Just drove himself to the airport, put the car in long-term, and came back in a week to show them pictures. His voice got slower and deeper than ever as he narrated snapshots of a post office, a parrot on a street sign, a plate of chicken and rice. He even showed Connor the photos. They were standing in the parking lot on a hot afternoon, but that didn't speed him along. He scrolled through the pictures one by one: *this is the school for all the children. This is my neighbor's dog.* And Connor, who

had had a long day, and a few paces from his car was being held captive by an old man's nostalgia, couldn't help himself. "That's great," he broke in, though he never interrupted Bartholomew. You could see how unused he must be to being cut off as he lowered his phone as stiffly as the tin man. "See you tomorrow," Connor said, clapping him briskly on the arm. By the time he swung into his car, he was mad at himself for losing his patience, and at Bartholomew for making him. Pictures of post offices, Christ. But as he was pulling into traffic, Connor suddenly remembered when he'd heard that tone of Bartholomew's before. Quietly joyful, solemnly proud, expounding. They'd been standing stageside at that awful talent show in Spokane, and he had been talking about Laure.

Bartholomew's feelings had always been like that, that powerful and that straightforward. Whatever he wanted he wanted for her, and what Connor or anyone thought of his actions didn't alter the goodness of his intentions. It was for and because of his daughter that he brought her to California. He wanted the awards for her— Oscars, Emmys, the cover of *People*, a profile in *The New York Times*. He wanted her to get the critical acclaim she deserved and he wanted her to be so famous they heard of her back in Nashop. He imagined all manner of success to satisfy his pride in her, all the while knowing his pride was insatiable.

Laure sometimes used to wonder whether her father would've been as proud of any child of his, or what her life might have been like if she'd been born a little plain. But hypothetical questions were useless by definition and besides, she'd always been the first to dismiss the value of her looks. Laure knew the difference between an intimidatingly pretty girl and an intimidating, pretty girl, and knew who got paid longer to be on TV. She had no idea how far her potential to be the latter reached. But she was trying. She was arriving punctually to audition after taping after meeting, looking as expressive and inscrutable as she possibly could, makeup minimal, serious air. She was doing it for her father mostly, for Connor probably more than she'd admit, and because she could. It rarely occurred to Laure not to do things she was capable of. Though, if it'd



been up to her in a different way, she would have stayed away from cameras. How she'd've loved to have never been looked at.

Not that her success was any matter of indifference to her now. Laure's discomfort being photographed at mattered no more than her instinct for reticence. She had committed herself fully to getting as famous as Bartholomew's own heart could desire. And then some. She knew by then what a rush it was to see her spell at work on someone. She knew the hot, proud flush of adrenaline that came with landing a role.

She'd been there when Connor got the call. They were in his office for another late night in a row, talking auditions, because by then they'd all but given up on *The Prophesied*. It was after midnight when his cell rang. Laure could tell the second he picked up the phone. To see him grinning shamelessly at her even as he gave smooth, practical answers to whoever was on the other end—he barely had time to hang up before they roared fit to drown out the silence of that whole empty building. They talked as fast as they could get the words out. Everything then seemed either possible or gained, and they were alone with their joy and a bottle of champagne. They had a plastic cup each, which went right to their heads as the adrenaline waned. Connor had hardly slept in days, Laure hardly ever drank, and they collapsed into sleep on his sofa. That was it, her best day, her favorite memory. The two of them waking to starchy throats and cotton light and the sounds of the janitor's work.

Laure's eyebrows knit slightly as she held on to the arm of her chair, not opening her eyes. "Where are you standing?" Naomi was prompting. "Is it hot in the sun?" Laure wasn't ignoring her anymore. By then something syrupy had filled up her bones, and she no longer skirted around the fact that she thought of him as she fell asleep. She felt full of hot, wobbly courage. Time to do what she'd sat down to. But this time, no Egypt. She'd get back to rehearsing during her sessions soon— she was a better actress for it, and better acting seemed a safe thing to ask the wizard for. But the idea had all along been there of another conversation she might rehearse.

Laure sank back in her chair, and started in the parking lot. The sun boomeranged off her concrete balcony the same way it would off of asphalt. She pictured the skinny palm trees and red gravel that lined the office park, the sound her tires would make as she parked. Then she opened the front door and headed to his office, over the gray carpet caned with blue, past familiar nicks on the wall. Connor's door was propped open, and she stood in the gap.

He must not have heard her in her ballet flats, and he looked at his computer as she looked at him. Laure wondered if other girls would have slept with him by now, whether she'd have done better to. She wondered if sex was even what Connor was after, since if that was really what he wanted, wouldn't he have gotten it by now? "Look up at me," she was going to say when she was ready. Mouthing the words, she could just hear how they'd sound on her lips. Look up at me, look up, look up.