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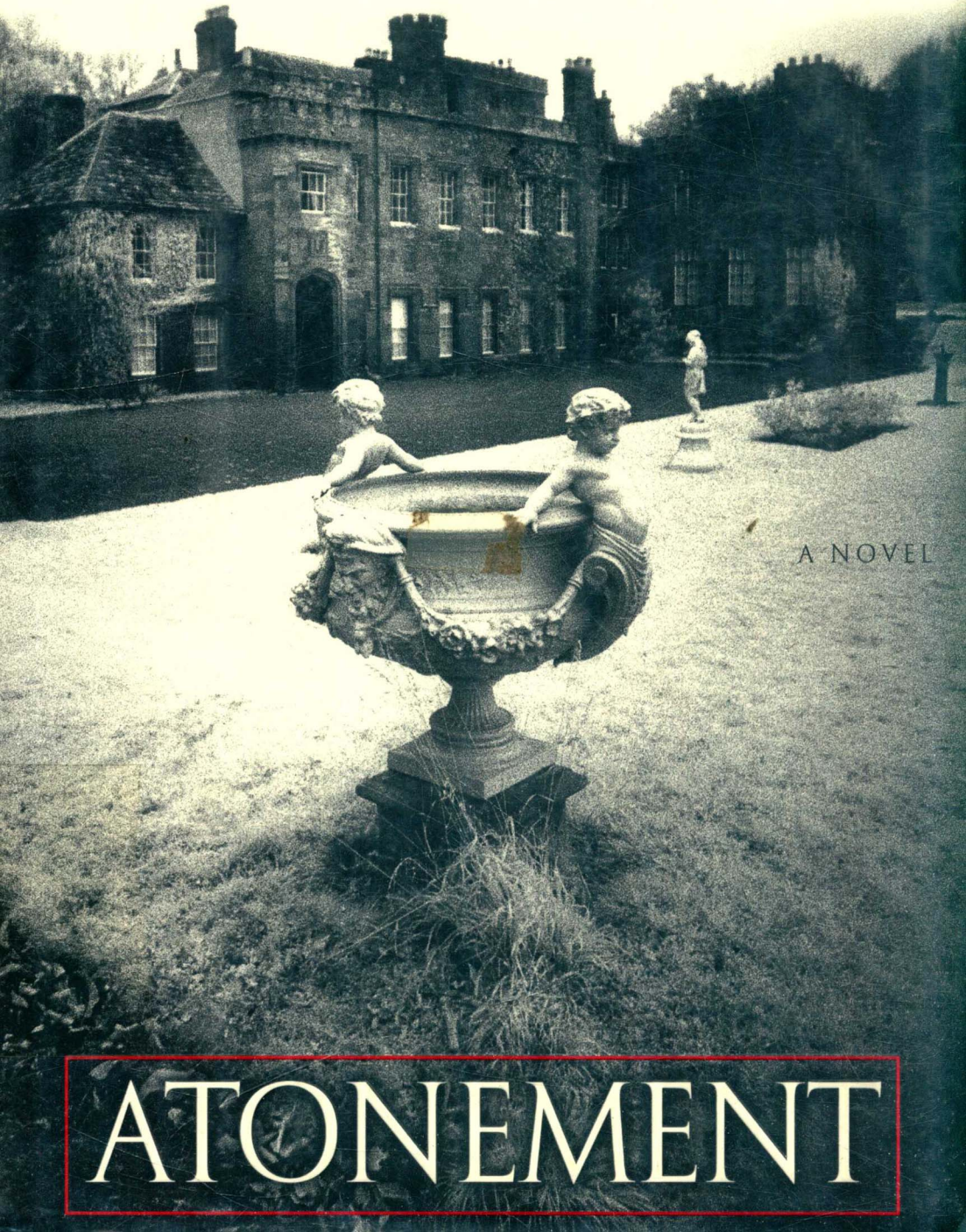

A NOVEL

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ATONEMENT

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

First Love, Last Rites

In Between the Sheets

The Cement Garden

The Comfort of Strangers

The Child in Time

The Innocent

Black Dogs

The Daydreamer

Enduring Love

Amsterdam

The Imitation Game
(plays for television)

Or Shall We Die?
(libretto for oratorio by Michael Berkeley)

The Ploughman's Lunch
(film script)

Sour Sweet
(film script)

To Annalena

"Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English: that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?"

They had reached the end of the gallery; and with tears of shame she ran off to her own room.

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

PART ONE

One

THE PLAY—for which Briony had designed the posters, programs and tickets, constructed the sales booth out of a folding screen tipped on its side, and lined the collection box in red crêpe paper—was written by her in a two-day tempest of composition, causing her to miss a breakfast and a lunch. When the preparations were complete, she had nothing to do but contemplate her finished draft and wait for the appearance of her cousins from the distant north. There would be time for only one day of rehearsal before her brother arrived. At some moments chilling, at others desperately sad, the play told a tale of the heart whose message, conveyed in a rhyming prologue, was that love which did not build a foundation on good sense was doomed. The reckless passion of the heroine, Arabella, for a wicked foreign count is punished by ill fortune when she contracts cholera during an impetuous dash toward a seaside town with her intended. Deserted by him and nearly everybody else, bed-bound in a garret, she discovers in herself a sense of humor. Fortune presents her a second chance in the form of an impoverished doctor—in fact, a prince in disguise who has elected to work among the needy. Healed by him, Arabella chooses judiciously this time, and is rewarded by

reconciliation with her family and a wedding with the medical prince on "a windy sunlit day in spring."

Mrs. Tallis read the seven pages of *The Trials of Arabella* in her bedroom, at her dressing table, with the author's arm around her shoulder the whole while. Briony studied her mother's face for every trace of shifting emotion, and Emily Tallis obliged with looks of alarm, snickers of glee and, at the end, grateful smiles and wise, affirming nods. She took her daughter in her arms, onto her lap—ah, that hot smooth little body she remembered from its infancy, and still not gone from her, not quite yet—and said that the play was "stupendous," and agreed instantly, murmuring into the tight whorl of the girl's ear, that this word could be quoted on the poster which was to be on an easel in the entrance hall by the ticket booth.

Briony was hardly to know it then, but this was the project's highest point of fulfillment. Nothing came near it for satisfaction, all else was dreams and frustration. There were moments in the summer dusk after her light was out, when she burrowed in the delicious gloom of her canopy bed, and made her heart thud with luminous, yearning fantasies, little playlets in themselves, every one of which featured Leon. In one, his big, good-natured face buckled in grief as Arabella sank in loneliness and despair. In another, there he was, cocktail in hand at some fashionable city watering hole, overheard boasting to a group of friends: Yes, my younger sister, Briony Tallis the writer, you must surely have heard of her. In a third, he punched the air in exultation as the final curtain fell, although there was no curtain, there was no possibility of a curtain. Her play was not for her cousins, it was for her brother, to celebrate his return, provoke his admiration and guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, toward the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony's services as a bridesmaid.

She was one of those children possessed by a desire to have the world just so. Whereas her big sister's room was a stew of unclosed

books, unfolded clothes, unmade bed, unemptied ashtrays, Briony's was a shrine to her controlling demon: the model farm spread across a deep window ledge consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way—toward their owner—as if about to break into song, and even the farmyard hens were neatly corralled. In fact, Briony's was the only tidy upstairs room in the house. Her straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls; the various thumb-sized figures to be found standing about her dressing table—cowboys, deep-sea divers, humanoid mice—suggested by their even ranks and spacing a citizen's army awaiting orders.

A taste for the miniature was one aspect of an orderly spirit. Another was a passion for secrets: in a prized varnished cabinet, a secret drawer was opened by pushing against the grain of a cleverly turned dovetail joint, and here she kept a diary locked by a clasp, and a notebook written in a code of her own invention. In a toy safe opened by six secret numbers she stored letters and postcards. An old tin petty cash box was hidden under a removable floorboard beneath her bed. In the box were treasures that dated back four years, to her ninth birthday when she began collecting: a mutant double acorn, fool's gold, a rainmaking spell bought at a funfair, a squirrel's skull as light as a leaf.

But hidden drawers, lockable diaries and cryptographic systems could not conceal from Briony the simple truth: she had no secrets. Her wish for a harmonious, organized world denied her the reckless possibilities of wrongdoing. Mayhem and destruction were too chaotic for her tastes, and she did not have it in her to be cruel. Her effective status as an only child, as well as the relative isolation of the Tallis house, kept her, at least during the long summer holidays, from girlish intrigues with friends. Nothing in her life was sufficiently interesting or shameful to merit hiding; no one knew about the squirrel's skull beneath her bed, but no one wanted to know. None of this was particularly an affliction; or rather, it appeared so only in retrospect, once a solution had been found.

At the age of eleven she wrote her first story—a foolish affair, imitative of half a dozen folktales and lacking, she realized later, that vital knowingness about the ways of the world which compels a reader's respect. But this first clumsy attempt showed her that the imagination itself was a source of secrets: once she had begun a story, no one could be told. Pretending in words was too tentative, too vulnerable, too embarrassing to let anyone know. Even writing out the *she said*s, the *and then*s, made her wince, and she felt foolish, appearing to know about the emotions of an imaginary being. Self-exposure was inevitable the moment she described a character's weakness; the reader was bound to speculate that she was describing herself. What other authority could she have? Only when a story was finished, all fates resolved and the whole matter sealed off at both ends so it resembled, at least in this one respect, every other finished story in the world, could she feel immune, and ready to punch holes in the margins, bind the chapters with pieces of string, paint or draw the cover, and take the finished work to show to her mother, or her father, when he was home.

Her efforts received encouragement. In fact, they were welcomed as the Tallises began to understand that the baby of the family possessed a strange mind and a facility with words. The long afternoons she spent browsing through dictionary and thesaurus made for constructions that were inept, but hauntingly so: the coins a villain concealed in his pocket were "esoteric," a hoodlum caught stealing a car wept in "shameless auto-exculpation," the heroine on her thoroughbred stallion made a "cursory" journey through the night, the king's furrowed brow was the "hieroglyph" of his displeasure. Briony was encouraged to read her stories aloud in the library and it surprised her parents and older sister to hear their quiet girl perform so boldly, making big gestures with her free arm, arching her eyebrows as she did the voices, and looking up from the page for seconds at a time as she read in order to gaze into one face after the other, unapologetically demanding her family's total attention as she cast her narrative spell.

Even without their attention and praise and obvious pleasure, Briony could not have been held back from her writing. In any case, she was discovering, as had many writers before her, that not all recognition is helpful. Cecilia's enthusiasm, for example, seemed a little overstated, tainted with condescension perhaps, and intrusive too; her big sister wanted each bound story catalogued and placed on the library shelves, between Rabindranath Tagore and Quintus Tertullian. If this was supposed to be a joke, Briony ignored it. She was on course now, and had found satisfaction on other levels; writing stories not only involved secrecy, it also gave her all the pleasures of miniaturization. A world could be made in five pages, and one that was more pleasing than a model farm. The childhood of a spoiled prince could be framed within half a page, a moonlit dash through sleepy villages was one rhythmically emphatic sentence, falling in love could be achieved in a single word—a *glance*. The pages of a recently finished story seemed to vibrate in her hand with all the life they contained. Her passion for tidiness was also satisfied, for an unruly world could be made just so. A crisis in a heroine's life could be made to coincide with hailstones, gales and thunder, whereas nuptials were generally blessed with good light and soft breezes. A love of order also shaped the principles of justice, with death and marriage the main engines of housekeeping, the former being set aside exclusively for the morally dubious, the latter a reward withheld until the final page.

The play she had written for Leon's homecoming was her first excursion into drama, and she had found the transition quite effortless. It was a relief not to be writing out the *she said*s, or describing the weather or the onset of spring or her heroine's face—beauty, she had discovered, occupied a narrow band. Ugliness, on the other hand, had infinite variation. A universe reduced to what was said in it was tidiness indeed, almost to the point of nullity, and to compensate, every utterance was delivered at the extremity of some feeling or other, in the service of which the exclamation mark was indispensable. *The Trials of Arabella* may have

been a melodrama, but its author had yet to hear the term. The piece was intended to inspire not laughter, but terror, relief and instruction, in that order, and the innocent intensity with which Briony set about the project—the posters, tickets, sales booth—made her particularly vulnerable to failure. She could easily have welcomed Leon with another of her stories, but it was the news that her cousins from the north were coming to stay that had prompted this leap into a new form.

That Lola, who was fifteen, and the nine-year-old twins, Jackson and Pierrot, were refugees from a bitter domestic civil war should have mattered more to Briony. She had heard her mother criticize the impulsive behavior of her younger sister Hermione, and lament the situation of the three children, and denounce her meek, evasive brother-in-law Cecil who had fled to the safety of All Souls College, Oxford. Briony had heard her mother and sister analyze the latest twists and outrages, charges and countercharges, and she knew her cousins' visit was an open-ended one, and might even extend into term time. She had heard it said that the house could easily absorb three children, and that the Quinceys could stay as long as they liked, provided the parents, if they ever visited simultaneously, kept their quarrels away from the Tallis household. Two rooms near Briony's had been dusted down, new curtains had been hung and furniture carried in from other rooms. Normally, she would have been involved in these preparations, but they happened to coincide with her two-day writing bout and the beginnings of the front-of-house construction. She vaguely knew that divorce was an affliction, but she did not regard it as a proper subject, and gave it no thought. It was a mundane unraveling that could not be reversed, and therefore offered no opportunities to the storyteller: it belonged in the realm of disorder. Marriage was the thing, or rather, a wedding was, with its formal neatness of virtue rewarded, the thrill of its pageantry and banqueting, and dizzy promise of lifelong union. A good wedding was an unacknowledged representation of the as yet unthink-

able—sexual bliss. In the aisles of country churches and grand city cathedrals, witnessed by a whole society of approving family and friends, her heroines and heroes reached their innocent climaxes and needed to go no further.

If divorce had presented itself as the dastardly antithesis of all this, it could easily have been cast onto the other pan of the scales, along with betrayal, illness, thieving, assault and mendacity. Instead it showed an unglamorous face of dull complexity and incessant wrangling. Like rearmament and the Abyssinia Question and gardening, it was simply not a subject, and when, after a long Saturday morning wait, Briony heard at last the sound of wheels on the gravel below her bedroom window, and snatched up her pages and ran down the stairs, across the hallway and out into the blinding light of midday, it was not insensitivity so much as a highly focused artistic ambition that caused her to shout to the dazed young visitors huddled together by the trap with their luggage, "I've got your parts, all written out. First performance tomorrow! Rehearsals start in five minutes!"

Immediately, her mother and sister were there to interpose a blander timetable. The visitors—all three were ginger-haired and freckled—were shown their rooms, their cases were carried up by Hardman's son Danny, there was cordial in the kitchen, a tour of the house, a swim in the pool and lunch in the south garden, under the shade of the vines. All the while, Emily and Cecilia Tallis maintained a patter that surely robbed the guests of the ease it was supposed to confer. Briony knew that if she had traveled two hundred miles to a strange house, bright questions and jokey asides, and being told in a hundred different ways that she was free to choose, would have oppressed her. It was not generally realized that what children mostly wanted was to be left alone. However, the Quinceys worked hard at pretending to be amused or liberated, and this boded well for *The Trials of Arabella*: this trio clearly had the knack of being what they were not, even though they barely resembled the characters they were to play. Before lunch Briony slipped away to the empty rehearsal room—the nursery—

and walked up and down on the painted floorboards, considering her casting options.

On the face of it, Arabella, whose hair was as dark as Briony's, was unlikely to be descended from freckled parents, or elope with a foreign freckled count, rent a garret room from a freckled innkeeper, lose her heart to a freckled prince and be married by a freckled vicar before a freckled congregation. But all this was to be so. Her cousins' coloring was too vivid—virtually fluorescent!—to be concealed. The best that could be said was that Arabella's *lack* of freckles was the sign—the hieroglyph, Briony might have written—of her distinction. Her purity of spirit would never be in doubt, though she moved through a blemished world. There was a further problem with the twins, who could not be told apart by a stranger. Was it right that the wicked count should so completely resemble the handsome prince, or that both should resemble Arabella's father *and* the vicar? What if Lola were cast as the prince? Jackson and Pierrot seemed typical eager little boys who would probably do as they were told. But would their sister play a man? She had green eyes and sharp bones in her face, and hollow cheeks, and there was something brittle in her reticence that suggested strong will and a temper easily lost. Merely floating the possibility of the role to Lola might provoke a crisis, and could Briony really hold hands with her before the altar, while Jackson intoned from the *Book of Common Prayer*?

It was not until five o'clock that afternoon that she was able to assemble her cast in the nursery. She had arranged three stools in a row, while she herself jammed her rump into an ancient baby's high chair—a bohemian touch that gave her a tennis umpire's advantage of height. The twins had come with reluctance from the pool where they had been for three hours without a break. They were barefoot and wore singlets over trunks that dripped onto the floorboards. Water also ran down their necks from their matted hair, and both boys were shivering and jiggled their knees to keep warm. The long immersion had puckered and bleached their skin, so that in the relatively low light of the nursery their freckles ap-