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of strong, unsparing light and brilliant detail."

—Helen Dunmore, author of Mourning Ruby and The Lilac Tree

away from you

Melanie Finn

a novel

# Away From You

MELANIE FINN



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For my mother and Pop And in memory of Pascal Privat

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This is what you remember about him: not much, but then you have been assiduous in your forgetting. His red sweater, v-neck, cashmere; the clink of ice cubes in a glass. He is shadow and voice, but you cannot recall his face. He is behind a closed door, in a forbidden room. He is asleep in his armchair, he is asleep in the driveway, asleep in your sandpit, face down, snoring but not harmless, even then. He is shouting, he is whispering, he is close but also remote as if at the end of a long hallway and you cannot hear him. His words never make any sense, he speaks some other language. His hands sometimes spin away from him like windmills, like pinwheels and Catherine wheels, snapping like firecrackers. There must be pain, but you cannot feel it.

Your skin bruises like apples.



### One

An intake of breath, or less, the fraction of a second it took to place a paw on the road's outer edge, the flexing of tendons up the leg to the taut muscles of the shoulder.

The coyote's winter-thick tawny fur was lit against the night's dense backdrop with such precision Ellie could see individual hairs. Its eyelashes and whiskers. In less than a breath she and the coyote knew: this intersection in time and space had been waiting for them for hours, or even years. Things always connected back.

If she hadn't seen the coyote she could have mistaken the soft bump for a minor pothole and driven on. Even as she looked in her rear-view mirror, she wanted to believe the coyote was bruised but running through the sagebrush to its den in the arroyo, to the greeting of barks and other wet noses, the smell of escape clinging to its fur. Or she wanted to believe the end had been quick, the impact definitive, the coyote old and at the end of its life; perhaps grateful for her intercession.

Instead she saw it spiralling in on itself. Back broken, it was spinning on two legs, snapping at its useless haunches. A circus trick performed in the red glow of the car's tail lights just for her, an audience of one. She stopped the car and got out.

There was no other traffic, not here on the back road that hemmed the mountains, not on this cold, hard winter night. There were lights in the distance, eight, ten miles away, the old Spanish towns along the Rio Grande, Velarde, Española, the Indian casinos in Pojoaque. No one close at hand to help. Or worse. She knew what happened to women alone on dark roads or drunk in dark bars, how the police found a pale body sprawled

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on the roadside and how no one in these small towns ever knew anything.

The tyre iron was in the trunk. Ellie felt its weight in her hands. The coyote didn't even see her coming. Its world had funnelled into a pain purer than any other experience of hunger or comfort or warm May sun on soft belly fur.

The first blow only stunned it. On the second it went down, and on the third she heard the skull crack. Like an egg, she thought. The coyote suddenly relaxed and lay down on the tarmac with a kind of relief. Ellie knelt down and stroked it. The rough coat was matted with pinesap, infested with fleas, torn here on a barbed wire fence or the teeth of a rival, but beautiful nonetheless, shot through with hues of pale grey, gold and silver and downy white on the underbelly. Blood pooled around the coyote's head and though she had felt no heartbeat, it blinked one last time and looked ahead as if focused on its next destination.

The night held them there, cushioning them from the rest of the world which moved noisily toward midnight. Somewhere drunks drove home and couples made love or fought and children dreamed. The lights went out in the Super-Walmart in Española and the bands started up in the bars of Santa Fe. But here, Ellie kneeled in the mountain silence with the coyote's warm blood steaming in the cold air. She became aware of the cold, sharp and certain through her wool sweater, and above her the flawless sky bloomed ever outward and away from her.

After a while she picked up the coyote, carried it off the road and laid it gently amongst the juniper and piñon. The act was inevitably weighed with the sacred. She couldn't bear for the fine bones and white teeth to be ground into the tar by careless drivers in pick-ups – for that dishonour. But honour, she knew, meant nothing to the coyote. Only fences, poison bait and speeding cars meant something. And, anyway, honour? What honour is left among us? In moving the coyote, she was simply being indulgent, like some ancient priestess who believes the

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future can be held at bay by chants and the burning of incense. Ritual is to reassure the living, not the dead.

She felt the rough pads of the coyote's paws and wondered at the miles it had travelled, etching lines in the sand or the snow. She wondered at the life it now left behind, the pack that waited at the edge of the woods – they would call out and there would be no reply. She thought about how the Navajos and Hopis know the coyote as the trickster, a creature whose presence unsettles the familiar. A coyote crossing the road is a messenger trailing change.

As she stood and walked back to the car she felt the change coming, her life beginning to shift. But the shift was happening in the synapse before the actual beginning, where there is only instinct like a faint scent travelling miles downwind.

She stopped at a Texaco on the main road and washed the coyote's blood from her hands in the ladies' room. Then she drove on to Santa Fe where she lived with Peter. Not 'home', but Peter's house. Which was her attitude not his. He wanted to share his life, his house, with her. When she moved in, he thought she was like other women and so he suggested they buy new furniture together. He plied her with fabric samples and trips to antique stores. But he soon realized she didn't care – no, more than that: she didn't want to step outside herself and partake. And so the garish sofa set inherited a decade ago from his first wife stayed, as did the coffee table and the curtains and the chipped plates. After two years together there was barely a trace of Ellie around the house; only books and half-drunk cups of tea.

Peter's house was at the end of a cul-de-sac of low-slung adobe bungalows ubiquitous in New Mexico. His Chevy Suburban was in the driveway, all manner of tools carefully ordered in the back. He'd left the front hall light on for her but otherwise the house was dark. She knew how he would be sleeping, on his back, baring himself to the world. She knew she would climb

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in next to him and he would reach for her, his big hands pulling her close to the enormous furnace of his body. From their first night together he had been a windbreak between her and the rest of the world.

Moses, the cat, waited by the front door, indifferent as ever. Peter had got him from the pound, had gone in on Christmas Eve and demanded the animal next in line for gassing. 'We don't gas them,' the volunteer told him, 'We euthanize them by injection.' 'Just give me the damn cat,' Peter had said. And they gave him Moses, who had viciously rejected all overtures of affection ever since.

Ellie let him in, followed him into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of rum, neat – the only spirit she could find in the cabinet by the fridge. On the fridge were photographs, a jigsaw of Peter's life that he carefully compiled and updated. Friends laughing, fishing trips, his nieces building a snowman, Moses stalking mice in the long grass behind the house.

There was a picture of Ellie, caught three-quarter face in the morning light last winter. The wind lifted her dark hair away from her neck, exposing her throat and cheekbones. Behind her, out of focus, was the tawny scrub and marshes of Bosque del Apache. She wasn't looking at the camera, but away from it, laughing, saying, 'Go away! I hate having my picture taken.'

Ellie looked now at a photograph of Peter from years ago, the summer's Kodachrome colours long faded. He was ten, fishing off Martha's Vineyard with his dad. His dad would say, 'Watch the gulls, they know where the fish are.' And Peter would watch the gulls and cast his line.

This was still how he moved through life, with an eye for the practical, using knowledge and skill to accomplish a definitive goal. He was a builder by profession, which was no different to fishing. Once you understood how the tools worked, the limits of materials, and trusted the steadiness of your hands, there were no surprises. And this was what he was offering her: a

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close-held life; not predictable but run through with sameness. He would love her always with his big strong healthy heart. He would never leave her.

Peter rolled onto his side, cupping her naked body, drawing her in to the sleepy warmth of the bed. Her smell was finally familiar to him, the layers of her like seasons. 'It's late. You've been out driving?'

'I needed to.'

He didn't ask why. There was so little he could explain about her. The driving was the least of it. How she'd drive all over New Mexico, taking I-40 to Gallup or the back road to Jemez or out to the listening station in Datil. All those hours and miles and no real destination. She just went, sometimes with a map, mostly without. Sometimes she didn't drive far, maybe just to Abiquiu where she'd hike around all day. She loved the fire-coloured rocks, the wind-carved canyons where Georgia O'Keeffe's ghost peered through old cow skulls at the sky.

Peter hoped that one day she might bring him something back, a pebble she'd found in the dust, earth-hued and smooth. Or a story, some funny incident she'd witnessed in a coffee shop in Socorro or Madrid. To share might be an act of staying. He waited for such an event, patiently and because there was no alternative. She'd come to him trailing her different pasts behind her like ribbons on a kite. She'd been long legs and bravado, with a couple of suitcases and a stack of driver's licences from a dozen states. She'd leave just the same way. Sometimes he fooled himself it would be different, that he could make her stay. Love gives you all kinds of delusions.

'And you?' she said. 'Did the plumber finally show?'

He laughed softly in the dark. 'His sister had a baby, so he says tomorrow. Without fail.'

'I thought his sister had a baby last week.'

'That was his wife.'

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'How many more babies might there be?'

'Oh, I think they've all been born. But now, you see, they can get sick and will have to be taken to the hospital.'

'You should just hire someone else. An orphan, someone with no family, a social outcast with no friends.'

'I should,' he said. But they both knew he wouldn't. Even though the plumber had failed to show up at the job-site for three weeks, Peter wouldn't fire him. He was faithful to those most faithless, he considered it payback to the world for all the fine things that had been laid upon his table. This she respected in him most of all, this rare gift to acknowledge the bounty of his life.

Now his hand slid across her hip to the curve of her waist. She knew the sign language and replied, softening toward him. He traced her collarbones with his carpenter's hands, admiring the joists, the deceptively delicate frame of her. He kissed all her sharp angles and smooth planes.

'Eleanor,' he whispered, and she leaned forward to kiss him, her hair covering their faces like a hide.

### Two

The letter came in the mail the next day, with the phone bill, a bank statement and a sale flyer from Vons supermarket. She knew the coyote hadn't brought it – she didn't believe in magic, only in symbols. But she wondered. How things are connected.

She knew where it came from by the stamp, a bright exotic bird whose name she'd long forgotten. She opened the creamcoloured envelope, the heavy, formal bond favoured by lawyers everywhere. And she read the letter.

What should she feel?

Certainly not grief. She hadn't thought of him for years, he was dead to her already. She wanted nothing to do with him, even dead in a letter.

Or the country. Forsaken long ago, it was now someone else's fantasy, a destination for package tours and Peace Corps workers.

The car keys were in her hand already, and so she drove north, past Española, turning right, and found herself where she had been the night before. A bus-load of school children drove by, their noise like a radio tuning in and out.

She got out of the car and sat on the hood. She could see and hear through the trees that a murder of crows had descended upon the coyote. She could not fault their lascivious cawing, how they fluttered and strutted in their widow's cloaks. Here, beyond man, death was always good for something. Death strung lives together like pearls.

The winter sun was brassy and hard and from the low-angled light there was no reprieve. She squinted, looking out across the landscape. The beauty had held her here far longer than any other place. The high peaks of the Sangre de Cristos hurried down to plains of sagebrush. In the west rose Mount Taylor and the solid monolith of the Pedernal where the sunset danced. Between here and there lay the Rio Grande and all manner of tributaries lined with willow and Spanish olive, aspen and oak; the irrigated orchards and hay fields; the crumbling houses the colour of earth. And above, always, the vast sky that left nowhere to hide.

She would be gone by the time Peter got home. This was how she left her other lovers, her other cities. She had perfected the art of leaving but not of farewell. After all, what was there to say? 'I don't love you. The failing is mine. The plumber can't come on time and I can't love, that's all there is to it, and every day with you reminds me of my failing.' Or worse: 'I'm sorry,' as if any apology, ever, was adequate. And she wasn't sorry, she wasn't filled with sorrow, she wasn't anything. She was light as a moth fluttering away.

Three days' driving and Ellie was there, the dirt road through the Maine woods where spring waited in the trees' tight buds, and across the wooden bridge that connected the rest of the world to Heron Island. The dogs came running out, barking, wagging their tails. Four dogs now, Ellie noticed. One up from last time – and this one, odds-on, also a stray.

The house was a summer cabin that Gus had winterized himself. Before retirement he'd been a businessman with soft, inept hands. He'd learned the hard way about toilets and water pumps and damp rot. The lights were on against an early dusk. There was smoke from the chimney.

Gus came out in the freezing wind. 'Ellie?'

'I should have phoned.' She stepped out of the car.

He was smiling, moving toward her in a tussle of dog. 'It's a wonderful surprise. It's great.'

As he hugged her, she realized he was old. Frailness had set in, a new thinness to his body under his heavy work shirts and rugged boots. Five years ago when she had been here last he had seemed ageless, a potent man still in the middle of his life. But of course, even then he'd been seventy.

He insisted on carrying her suitcase. It wasn't heavy but she could see it was an effort. Though not as much of an effort, perhaps, as to admit he couldn't carry it.

'Your mother'll be happy to see you. She's a bit under the weather. A bad cold she picked up from the school.'

'All those kids with snotty noses.'

'She works too hard. She wears herself down. People lean on her too much.'

'She does exactly what she wants to do. No one forces her to volunteer at the library. Or whatever it is.' Ellie was careful to keep the accusation out of her voice. But the anger was there again – always – a hard tumour at the base of her throat.

'The children's library, adult literacy in the prison, and all her usual lame ducks. Last week Rachel's husband just left her so we have Rachel on the phone, Rachel around for tea, Rachel around for coffee. They wear her down.'

It was always like this, Gus as her mother's protector. As if her mother was some guileless, delicate creature the rest of the world used as a doormat. Always. Ellie remembered something Peter said: Some things in life are certain; death, taxes and that your family will piss you off. He said other things, one-liners that made her laugh out loud. Once, she'd dragged him to a Japanese movie. The subtitles came up and he said, 'Gee, sweetie, if I'd wanted to read I would've stayed home with a book.'

Gus pulled open the front door and they edged by the woodpile that crowded the mudroom. 'This is the last winter we're going to have the stove. Your mother hates it. We'll switch to propane now.'

The dogs rushed inside with them, a current of noise and fur. 'Helen?' Gus called out.

But she was already coming into the kitchen, a petite, fine-