

“Stunningly good... This novel is big.
It’s complicated. It’s witty, it’s violent, and it will give readers
a first-rate run for their money” —*Los Angeles Herald*

SHOOTING *in the* DARK

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CHAPTER ONE

SHE WAS STANDING IN FRONT of the mirror in the bathroom, head tilted forward while she applied mascara. She had a dentist's appointment at nine, having planned to get it over with as early as possible to spare herself the usual crescendo of dread. She still held her head at an odd angle, eyelids at half-mast to keep the mascara from smearing, when Jeff came in. He stood behind her, wearing his white terrycloth robe, and said, "Claire, I've got to talk to you."

"What?" She smoothed blusher on her cheeks, wondering why she always dressed so carefully for appointments with dentists, doctors; why she always put on makeup. Some arcane defense against pain. She wondered if war paint...

"I've got to talk to you," Jeff said again, sending a little zip of warning through her. The phrase itself alarmed her—a bad-news phrase. A shuffle of possibilities: he's got cancer, I've got cancer, my mother/father has been killed,

he's been fired. But when she turned from the mirror, his eyes skidded away from hers. He stood there with his hands bunched up in the pockets of his robe, staring at the floor, and said, "I'm leaving you."

First she felt a quiver of relief—No one's dead—and then she decided it was one of his jokes. He was always catching people with his deadpan delivery.

"I know, I know. First the teeth go; next thing you know, the skin begins to lose its youthful elasticity; the hair..."

She turned back to the mirror, opened her mouth into a circle and put on some lipstick, then pressed her lips together to smooth out the color.

"Claire!" He almost shouted it, and she stood there perfectly still, watching his reflection as he repeated in his helpless, excited voice, "I'm leaving you."

His lips were pressed together in a thin line, his eyes locked to hers in the mirror.

"I can't go to the dentist now," she said in a high, thin voice.

His words settled into meaning with a dull, hopeless thud in the exact center of her head. His eyes let go, and she found she was looking at herself. She looked exactly the same. She reached up with her index fingers and pressed up against the ridges of her cheekbones. The skin bunched up under her eyes; she looked as if she were pretending to be Chinese. Then she opened her eyes very wide and said, "My tooth hurts."

A sense of distortion set in, as if she were seeing things from a vantage point in the air, or she and Jeff were overlaid with movie footage, flickering. And the woman said with huge big-screen lips, "Is there someone else?"

And the man said, "Yes."

She shut her eyes. Very briefly, she felt sorry for him, wondering how long he'd been waiting for exactly the right moment, how many false starts he'd made, how long he'd been pretending everything was normal. His image burned in her head—his helpless eyes, his white robe. He looked so vulnerable, she had an absurd urge to comfort him.

But then plumes of white flared up in a sickening way behind her eyelids, and when she opened her eyes to look at him, she was a little surprised he didn't wither under her white glare. Irradiation. He touched her shoulder and she felt like grabbing him and knocking his head against the tiled wall.

"Get out."

She couldn't wait for him to be out of there. He seemed to be taking up every cubic inch of space, turning the air swampy and foul with deceit.

"I'm sorry. I—"

"Jeff, get *out* of here." She was pushing him toward the door with clumsy little nudges, and there was a ridiculous scuffle while they vied for territory. They knocked against the wicker shelf attached to the back of the door. A perfume bottle—a blue one, Je Reviens—fell to the floor and shattered, instantly filling the room with oppressive sweetness. He lurched back, to avoid the shattering glass, and she took advantage, pushing him out, slamming the door shut. She locked it.

"We've got to talk. I didn't mean to...I didn't mean for this to happen. I met her—"

"Jeff, *shut up*." She didn't want one bit of information.

"Are you all right?" he asked through the door. Asking absolution.

“Just get out of here. I can’t stand for you to be here. Get *out*.” Her voice got away from her.

She heard him walk away from the door and pull open a drawer. He’s not even dressed for a quick exit, she thought, and was as mad about that as she was about anything. She turned on all the water faucets because she couldn’t stand listening to him get dressed.

She began cleaning up the glass, picking up the larger pieces in a gingerly way, then taking wads of damp toilet paper and trying to get the tiny splinters off the floor. One stuck in her hand, and she extracted it with great precision. The room was now full of steam, and the perfume was beginning to make her sick. He must be gone by now, she thought. She turned off the water and cracked open the door. There he was, fully dressed, sitting on the bed. He gave a weird little shrug of his shoulders.

“It didn’t seem right to just leave.”

“What do you want to do, comfort me? I can’t stand it that you’re still here.” She tried to push him off the bed, and when that was ineffectual, she hit him twice on the back as hard as she could. “Please, Jeff, get *out*. Just get *out*.”

“I still love you. I don’t want anything bad to happen.” Tears actually glittered in his eyes. The tears enraged her.

“I don’t want your moral torment,” she said in a cold, reasonable voice.

“I called Eileen. She said she’d come over at lunch.”

The presumption of this stunned her. Eileen was Claire’s best friend, but...“You told *Eileen*; you told someone else before you even told me?” She started hitting him again. “Look, you said you were leaving me—isn’t

that how you put it? 'I'm leaving you.' So would you *leave*? I can't stand this."

"Claire."

She started for the door. "If you don't get the fuck out of here right now, I'm going to go out in the hall and start screaming as loud as I can." She opened the door.

He offered a defeated shrug but hesitated once more, at the threshold. She stepped aside, refusing to look at him. "I'll call you," he said.

The first thing she did after locking the door was take the phone off the hook.



She sat immobilized in the brown corduroy chair, thinking of nothing. The room seemed to be shrinking, while the furniture, the paintings, the objects she and Jeff had accumulated grew larger and more distinct. Everything had a crystalline quality: the coffee table, for instance, a miracle of defined edges, pure planes. She herself felt blurry and insubstantial, as if she might disintegrate slowly into the chair, leaving nothing but an oily stain.

The ghost voice of the telephone startled her: "...dial again. If you need assistance, dial the operator. This is a recording." Then it lapsed into an insistent bleating. She couldn't seem to move.

Her mind short-circuited and she kept thinking in clichés. Several times she thought, I'm not taking this well.

A small Waterford vase, now full of daisies, that she and Jeff had bought long ago in a moment of extravagance reproached her from the coffee table. She remembered buying it; she remembered with an almost fright-

ening clarity how hard it had been to remove the price tag from the bottom, the gummy residue that persisted for years. She felt like throwing it into the fireplace; but that too seemed like something already seen in a movie. She could imagine the camera panning the shards of crystal, the scattered flowers, the spreading pool of water. Her feelings seemed plagiarized from an unpromising source.

She lurched out of the chair, swaying slightly. She wondered vaguely how long she'd been sitting there. Why not try the script where you go for a walk and have a few stiff drinks? she thought. A drunken stupor might be better than a catatonic stupor. Certainly worth a try.

Released from the room, she wanted to get outside, and waited for the elevator with toe-tapping impatience. She exchanged nods with the doorman and went out, watching gratefully as a cab pulled up seconds later. A woman with a vague resemblance to herself got out. Claire tilted into the back seat and pulled the door shut, watching the woman go into the apartment building. She had the uneasy feeling they were replacing each other.

"The Hilton," she decided out loud, in a voice that sounded squeezed out, like toothpaste. Certainly you could have an anonymous lunch and a few stiff drinks in the New York Hilton.

For once she was grateful for the foggy plastic shield that separated her from the driver. She didn't feel like talking; she wondered, in fact, if she *could* talk. If she said anything, it would be "Nice day." Then she thought again, I'm not taking this well, and recognized the clichéd thinking for what it was—stalling for time. A way to persuade herself that people did this sort of thing—husbands left their wives, out of the blue; it was normal.

A way to keep herself from doing something irrevocable like throwing herself out the door or screaming “I’m going to kill the fucker,” or somehow going bananas in an awful, public way. The city slipped by outside, smooth as silk, and once again she imagined it from the air, the yellow lozenge of the taxi slipping from lane to lane as it sped uptown.

She’d never been in the Hilton before, but her instincts proved right. She felt securely anonymous among the businessmen with HELLO tags as she ordered a double martini on the rocks. She nodded gravely when the waiter asked if she wanted it with “a twist.”

“What kind of convention is this, anyway?” she asked.

“Anesthesiologists,” he confided.

“Perfect,” she muttered. The waiter slid away.

When he brought her drink, she half-expected someone with a vague cinematic familiarity to approach and say, “Are you alone?” To which she would reply, “Not anymore,” and the two of them would whirl away into a montage of nights on the town, walks in the park and misty sexual encounters. She couldn’t shake this giddy sense of unreality.

She ordered a shrimp salad, to preserve decorum, and a second martini, to produce the gauzy alcoholic haze she pursued. Jeff’s voice echoed in her head: “I’m leaving you.” Everything was different. In one second, everything had changed. It was like finding a Russian tank, brutal and inscrutable, blocking the way up Fifth Avenue. All bets were off. Her heart started beating so hard she seemed to vibrate like a tuning fork. Ice chattered against the sides of the glass, and she set her drink down.

All right, said a voice in her head. All right all right. Anything could happen, everyone knew that; she’d

always known that. Time is not a sanctuary. People got run over by cars, pushed under subways; planes crashed; there was no end of unexpected calamity. Her mother had a certain zest for grotesque stories, the ways someone's life could take a sudden U-turn. Claire was kept fully informed and constantly warned of possible dangers. Don't run with that pencil—you could fall and poke your eye out. Don't take candy, take rides; I knew a woman...But although she often worried about other people, she had never believed anything terrible would happen to her. That steady optimism was responsible for her easygoing nature, for the serenity Jeff admired. Oh, shit, *Jeff*.

Call a friend, commanded an anonymous interior voice that emanated from dozens of skimmed magazine articles. That's how these things are handled. Call a friend, talk it out, have a good cry.

But she didn't have any friends who were strictly hers; they were all *their* friends, even Eileen. Everyone had been drawn into the circle or abandoned. Just as the alone Claire had been abandoned eight years ago, and lived on only in a kind of shrine in her parents' house in Nyack, in photographic icons scattered on bureaus, standing in ranks on the piano. Even there, Jeff was represented, imprisoned with her behind glass in a perpetual marital hug.

If only she'd had some suspicion—couldn't Jeff have left clues, hints, *something*—so at least she could have enjoyed the seedy triumph of finding out? Probably he had, but she'd insisted on going along, stupidly being happy, until the guilt got to him; he couldn't stand the weight of his deception; he had to give it to her like a grenade.

How could she have been with him all the time, slept

next to him every night, and not have known there was “someone else”? There must have been some telltale hesitancy, some holding back—you’d think the knowledge would seep in by osmosis, through her pores, as she lay next to him night after night. And *who is this someone else?* She wanted to know; she didn’t want to know; she pushed the question away. Her face burned like a radiant heater. She was tempted to hold the martini glass against her cheek, but she stopped herself.

The buzz of conversation around her seemed to be building in an ominous crescendo. She shut her eyes, and certain phrases carried above the roar with perfect clarity.

“...new intake valve allows a more accurate mix...”

“...almost fired the nurse anesthetist.”

“...so I said to him, Look, Saul, you know and I know...”

Claire shook her head, deliberately, as if she had water in her ear; threw a twenty onto the table and fled.

She wobbled onto the street, feeling soothed by the fresh cool air. A brilliant day. Sharp points of light ricocheted off store windows; a red car gleamed at the curb. She headed down the street, trying to imagine the future.

What now? These marital fissions were common, after all, especially in New York. Everyone was well rehearsed. People would look the other way at the office while she wept into her coffee. Consoling arms would slide along her shoulders. The ranks of their friends would divide and form...teams. A tall black man, dressed entirely in leather, boogied past, holding a huge transistor radio to his ear. The music floated away with him, and then disappeared in the blare of a siren.

She had a brief vision of all their friends dressed in Knicks uniforms, loping onto a polished wood floor. “And at small forward, Eileen *Sheparrrrrd*.” She leaned against the window of a boutique, and her eyes fastened on a mannequin wearing a white T-shirt and shocking pink walking shorts. The mannequin stared into the distance, shading her eyes with her hands.

Some friends would accomplish the precarious balancing act required to still be friends with both of them. “Should we invite Claire or Jeff to dinner?” People would deliver the pro forma “How *are* you?” with weighty concern. She might go to a shrink, a shrink to weave a little confusion, a little patch job over her...ego?

Heart.

This vision of the future had an alarming precision, a practiced, polished brightness. As if she had known all along, somehow. A subway rumbled somewhere beneath her, and she wished it were louder; much louder; loud enough to derail this ordinary day. She wanted these people hurrying around in such a regular way, she wanted these people diving for cover, screaming for mercy. She wanted...*parity*—such a stuffy word. She stumbled and walked on, numb.

Then would come the orchestrated banality: separation agreement, divorce papers, lawyers, judges, division of possessions. She’d been through all this, with Lally, with Nick and Edie. “I’ll take the china; you take the T.V.” She would call Jeff “my first husband.” Did that mean there would be a second? “My ex-husband.” “My ex-husband used to say.” “My ex.” Crossed out.

An interior voice sprang forward: *Jesus, you act like it’s all over and done with. Maybe he’ll see it’s all a mistake, a terrible mistake, a momentary infatuation. Maybe he can’t live without you—he’s always said that. “Never leave me,*

Claire. Promise me. Promise me that.” Reconciliation gleamed in her mind. He would come back, with that same earnest look on his face, a humble Jeff. “Just give me one chance, Claire.” She could forgive him. She made a preliminary test of her ability to forgive him. She might, she might forgive him. But it would cost her something; it would cost them something. It would never be the same, never again.

She passed a shop with a fancy array of hairbrushes and toothbrushes in the window. Did he have a toothbrush at her house? At this other woman’s house? Or didn’t he need one, since he never stayed overnight? Maybe he used her toothbrush. Had he really gone to Washington two weeks ago? She looked around for a telephone booth. She would call the IRS, find out if there had really been a conference. She stumbled on. What an insane idea; she didn’t need proof. He’d *told* her. She didn’t want to know the details of his deception.

She stopped walking. He wouldn’t come back. Jeff was decisive; Jeff was no dabbler. He committed himself, burned his bridges; she knew him. A slight breeze ruffled her long blond hair. What did she mean, she *knew* him? How could he do this after eight years, with no warning? How *long* had this been going on? Was it going on when they went skating and she sprained her ankle and he was—

Just then a man in a pin-striped suit bumped into her with enough force to knock her down.

“Are you all right?” He frowned with concern as he helped her up. The look lasted only the instant until she said, “I’m okay.”

“Sorry.” He sped off.

She realized she must be drunk, possibly very drunk. She felt steady, but the buildings seemed askew and people swam into view much too fast. The crowd surged

around her as if she were a statue, a monument. She turned and saw the door to a travel agency. HORIZON TRAVEL SERVICE. She made her way to the door and stepped in, taking refuge in a display of glossy leaflets: cruise ships, mountains, bone-white beaches arrayed like dreams.

Of course, she realized. She would go *away*. Why do they say you can't run away? It's better than standing still in the middle of the sidewalk and letting people knock you down. It's one way to keep moving. It was so simple—she would *leave*. She laughed. It came out as a kind of muffled bark.

She studied the brochures for a while. Beaches were out. The pictures of bronzed people with their aggressive white teeth filled her with despair. The photographs showed them charging exuberantly out of the surf, surrounded by haloes of water droplets trapped in midair by the camera. They were obviously having the time of their lives. She lacked the energy even to imagine herself charging out of the surf. There were insets of smaller photographs, showing equally bronzed bodies, maybe the same ones, worn out from frolicking, stretched out on the beach sunning themselves. Moisture beaded their perfect oiled skin. No. The sun would beat her senseless. Indolence would do her in.

She needed to keep busy. She turned to Europe. Paris and Rome seemed full of hyperactive tourists, confirming sights memorized from postcards. London was out. She and Jeff had spent two well-planned weeks there, happily exploring. The thought of Jeff took her by surprise, like a trapdoor. Her body gave a nightmare jerk, as it did sometimes when she was falling asleep, wrenching her awake with a horrible spurt of panic.

She clutched a brochure that announced "Surprising

Amsterdam.” Here were capable, sturdy-looking people bicycling past charming buildings. Old stone bridges arching over canals lined with houseboats. Serene art lovers gazing at Rembrandts, Vermeers, Van Goghs.

She sat on a swivel chair upholstered in orange burlap. The travel agent, wearing a neat blue suit and emanating a powerful floral scent, turned to greet her.

“May I help you?” she asked, revealing a perfect smile marred by a smear of lipstick on her front teeth. Claire wanted to tell her about the lipstick, but she felt people were seldom grateful for that kind of information. They preferred to discover such things in the privacy of a bathroom and then pretend that no one had noticed.

“I want to get a ticket to Amsterdam.”

“Round trip?”

“One way. For tomorrow—no, the day after tomorrow.”

The travel agent cocked one elegantly tweezed eyebrow. “It might be tricky right now. The flower season is in full swing. I’ll see what I can do.”

She swiveled around to her telephone and computer terminal with a brisk efficiency (shared by doctors’ receptionists, stewardesses, nurses) that never failed to impress Claire.

“I can get you on a KLM flight that leaves Kennedy on April twenty-seventh at six P.M. All right?”

Claire nodded.

“In the meantime, you would be wise to reserve a hotel room.” She offered a blue-and-white leaflet. Golden Tulip Hotels.

A few minutes later, it was all set up. The Golden Tulip Hotels were all booked up, but the agent managed to find Claire a room in something called the Dikker and

Thys Garden Hotel. "It's not in the old part of town, but they have a very good tourist office there—the VVV—and perhaps you can find something else after the first night." The room cost eighty dollars a night, which seemed a lot, but Claire was not going to scrimp; at least, not at first. She put the KLM ticket, the hotel voucher and her American Express card into her purse and zipped it shut.

She looked up and confided shyly, "You know, you have lipstick on your teeth."

"Oh! Thanks for telling me," said the travel agent in her grateful, chirpy voice. "And you have gin on your breath. Have a good trip."

Right, thought Claire, pushing out to the street. People don't want to know. No, they *do* want to know, but they hold it against you when you tell them.

In the back seat of the taxi, she flipped mindlessly through *The New York Times*, forgetting to read the words. A picture of Rosie Ruiz, suspected of fraud in the Boston Marathon, snagged her attention. Rosie continued to insist that she had run the whole race, but speculation was that she would be denounced. Would they make her give her laurel crown to Jacqueline Gareau, the runner-up? Would Jacqueline Gareau want a used laurel crown? Then there was Lillian Carter, shown presenting a painting to President Sadat of Egypt. The painting showed Sadat, Menachem Begin and Jimmy Carter standing together. Claire kept trying to read the story, but had trouble focusing. She sank back into the seat. How is it that we have a President named Jimmy? Menachem, Anwar and Helmut and Leonid...Muammar, Margaret, Indira and *Jimmy*. She tried the front page. And Tito. Wasn't Tito a nickname, a kind of slavic Jimmy? Tito was in a coma. She had to

squint, even to read the smaller headlines; the stories themselves were out. She folded the newspaper together neatly and concentrated on extracting some money from her purse. Somehow, although she felt badly for Jacqueline Gareau, she couldn't help feeling sorry for Rosie Ruiz. Still, she knew she was a sucker for feeling that way.



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