

BLOOM

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A NOVEL

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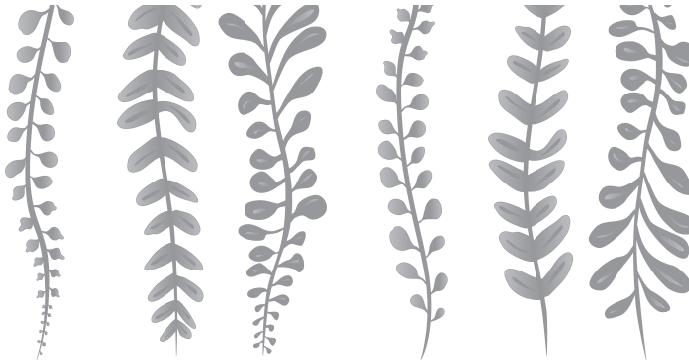
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For those who've struggled to bloom

Who knows, perhaps one day the language of trees will
eventually be deciphered, giving us the raw material
for further amazing stories.

—PETER WOHLLEBEN

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CHAPTER 1

Jade

‘M GOING TO DIE TODAY. I’m not always as certain about things as I am about this, but if there’s one thing that I’ve always been able to trust, it’s whatever my roots are trying to tell me. And they told me this morning, right when the light nudged me awake, that today’s sunrise would be my last—all thanks to Second Sapien.

I should probably back up a bit.

Hi. I’m Jade. I sprouted just two years ago, but you shouldn’t be fooled by my youth. Age really is just a number, as Sapiens say, and that’s especially true when comparing the developmental speeds of succulent houseplants and social primates. I, for example, have been independent since my sprouting. But if I were instead a two-year-old Sapien, I’d be an onery menace who demands respect while defecating relentlessly, a burden on my own kind more than an asset to our survival. Also, it’s a less relevant point, but don’t they say Sapien seedlings are cute? Because I just don’t see it.

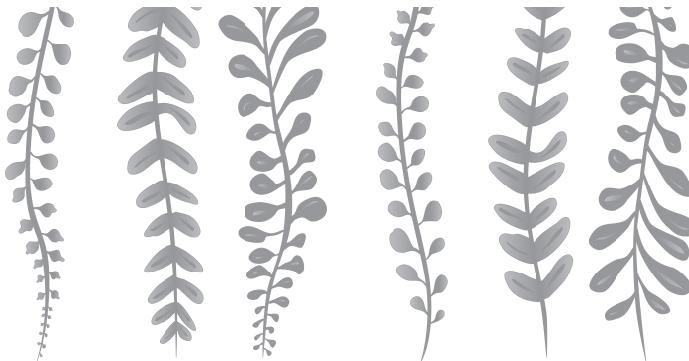
I’m sorry. I’m normally not this grouchy. My imminent death is probably what’s to blame. I really do love your kind, I swear.

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Sapiens traverse oceans to cure wanderlust disease and snatch salty potatoes through automobile windows for energy. They study to mend broken bones, cry to heal broken hearts, and spend most of their present either yearning for their past or fearing what's to come. They're a fascinating, lovely bunch.

Except for Second Sapien.

He's the one responsible for my shriveled leaves and starved soil. After his husband, First Sapien, died two seasons ago, Second Sapien plucked my pot from the window, where I lived with all the others, and shoved me into a dark corner just to be forgotten. If I've done something to him that deserves such malice, I certainly would like to know—preferably before I'm dead.



CHAPTER 2

Sloan

SLOAN HOPPERBOT NEVER WAS A wedding person. She's not even one now, when the one she's supposed to care about is her own.

Sloan knew the type of girls in school who had their hypothetical husbands' names decided by sixth grade and the color of their bridesmaids' dresses chosen by seventh; she just wasn't one of them. And yet somehow she's become the stereotypical bride-to-be, holding back tears at the florist and choosing to bite her tongue instead of lashing out at her mom. Sloan didn't think she cared enough about all this to become a cliché, but most brides probably say the same.

Sloan dips behind a big vase overflowing with purply-pink hydrangeas, then checks her reflection in her camera phone to ensure her eyes haven't leaked. The last thing she needs right now is to be interrogated about her tears by her mom, Beth.

"Hey," Todd says with a hesitant smile, approaching Sloan.

Sloan pockets her phone and looks up at him with a sigh. "Do we have to have a wedding?"

"Cold feet?"

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“Frigid.”

“Same.”

Sloan grins up at her six-foot-four fiancé—a sales associate at the local bike rental shop, who looks like “a Korean kid who discovered football in high school and Twinkies in college,” as Beth put it the night she met him. Beth gave him a disapproving stare earlier for wearing holey jeans and a hoodie to meet the florist, which further confirmed Sloan is making the right choice by marrying him.

Todd returns Sloan’s grin while staring down at his five-foot-four fiancée—a mediocre waitress with strawberry-blond hair and a pierced cartilage that makes her look like, as Beth once phrased it, “one of those college girls who goes to protests against fur coats.”

“Don’t let her get in your head,” Todd whispers.

Sloan cranes her neck to see over the hydrangeas. “Is it sad that I don’t know which ‘her’ you’re talking about?” Sloan’s aunt, Angela, and Beth are hissing back and forth animatedly on the other side of the shop, each insufferable in their own unique way.

“You don’t have to ask your brother or your uncle to walk you down the aisle,” Todd says even softer. “You don’t have to ask anyone.”

“Am I hearing that you want me to parachute down to you at the altar?”

Todd considers it. “Yes.”

Sloan has gotten used to hearing Beth and Angela openly debating wedding choices in front of her, as if the bride’s two cents are merely an afterthought. It’s always been obnoxious, but at least it’s been tolerable. Color palettes and seating charts are one thing; feuding over which undeserving male family member will walk Sloan down the aisle? That’s an entirely different beast—especially seeing as her dad just died.

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Prior to answering her phone and learning about the stroke that killed Fred Hopperbot six months ago, Sloan never envisioned Fred giving her away. It's not that she *didn't* want her dad walking her down the aisle or imagined someone else doing it, she just never fantasized about her wedding at all. Maybe that makes her a less-than-stellar daughter, or maybe her allergy to sappy romance films is to blame. But now that Fred's gone, Sloan hasn't been able to stop imagining her arm linked with Fred's as they walk toward Todd at the altar—a made-up memory she can't have, haunting her like clockwork.

Todd glances at Beth and Angela on the opposite side of the shop. "It doesn't look like they're fighting anymore."

Sloan narrows her eyes on her aunt. "Nah, they're still at it."

"Really?"

"Not about who's walking me down the aisle," Sloan says, sensing their claws have retracted, but only to a degree. "They're still bickering about something, though."

Sloan and Todd quietly lean forward in an attempt to eavesdrop and both hear Beth say, "Stevie Wonder." They turn to each other in defeat and mouth *the DJ* simultaneously.

Getting to marry Todd at the end of all this is the only thing keeping Sloan sane.

They originally wanted their wedding small and inexpensive—a decision that Beth didn't so much support as tolerate with exceptions. But after the sensible venue they booked canceled Sloan and Todd's ceremony due to pending flood damage repairs, Beth declared herself crisis manager and stepped in. With Sloan slogging through her grief following Fred's death, it was an easy power grab.

A new venue would mean a new everything else, too, Beth had argued—from the menu to the music to the flowers—and a wounded

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Sloan and an indifferent Todd decided that relinquishing was smarter than fighting a battle they were bound to lose. Now, armed with a bigger budget to throw the wedding of her dreams, Beth has become living proof that more money really does equal more problems—and a wedding that Sloan and Todd feel is becoming less and less their own.

Sloan hears her mom muttering about the “Cha Cha Slide” as Beth and Angela break out of their bubble and glance around the shop in search of Sloan and Todd. Unfortunately, Sloan would need several more vases stuffed with hydrangeas to adequately block Todd from their view, so the sisters quickly see their hiding spot and wander over.

“Are you okay?” Beth asks Sloan as she approaches.

“Yeah,” Sloan answers dismissively, hoping to squash any suspicion. “Why?”

Beth’s big eyes refuse to blink behind the gold rims of her glasses.

“Are you sure?” Beth asks again, this time directing her question at Todd.

The holes in his jeans look even holier next to an overpolished Beth in an all-beige pantsuit. Sloan can see the actual gulp move down her fiancé’s throat. “Yeah,” he replies, glancing at Sloan, “I think so?”

A short staring match ensues before Beth decides to move on. “Well, alright,” she says with a sigh, “did you decide on an arrangement?” But what she’s really asking is, of the many floral arrangements Sloan and Todd have considered, which one did they choose from the only two options that got stamped with Beth’s approval?

Sloan doesn’t respond, so, again, Beth shifts her gaze to Todd.

He glances at his fiancée, then back to Beth. “I think . . . the second one?” he answers with even less certainty than before. Guilt tugs at Sloan’s chest as she remembers Todd’s accurate claim that Beth is the LeBron James of intimidating mothers-in-law.

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Beth rubs a single pearl earring, her eyes still stuck on Todd. “So the one with the blues and yellows . . .”

“Yes. Wait. I mean . . . yes?”

Beth pauses. “Okay.”

Sloan knows that a reluctant “okay” as opposed to a knee-jerk “good” means they haven’t heard the end of it yet.

“What about you?” Angela asks Sloan, leaning to the side to see her niece beyond the hydrangeas. Her full head of jet-black Chia Pet hair comes into Sloan’s view. She’s not sure which of her aunt’s new attractions look worse: the botched dye job or the eyebrows that could’ve been penciled in by a fourth grader. “You like the second one, too, Sloan?”

Sloan nods.

“Oh, *God*,” Beth says, turning to her sister. “See? She’s giving us the silent treatment. I told you she’s mad about something.”

“I’m not giving you the silent treatment,” Sloan counters.

“It’s because we brought up Paul and Dick,” Beth says to Angela. “I knew it.”

Angela’s eyes bulge. “Is that why you stormed off?”

“I didn’t storm off—”

“Aw, hon.” Angela cuts her off with a condescending chuckle. “I know the emotions are still raw, but weddings take planning.” She grins at Sloan pitifully. “I mean, *someone* has to give you away . . .”

Sloan feels it again: a fit of rage rising in her chest. She may love her douchebag brother, Paul, and her sexist uncle, Dick. But she’d prefer both of them be bedridden at home with food poisoning on her big day rather than walking anyone down an aisle. She needs to get out of this store as quickly as possible, before she says something about Angela’s eyebrows that she won’t be able to take back.

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“We were here to choose flowers, weren’t we?” Sloan argues, trying to stay calm. “I didn’t think I had to make a decision about who’s walking me down—”

Sloan’s eyes fall onto a jade plant centered on a nearby table of succulents, and the sight immediately shuts her up. With plump green teardrops for leaves expanding out from the stems, the potted plant looks just like the one Sloan gifted her dad a couple years ago.

The memory gives Sloan an exciting idea. An ill-formed and potentially reckless idea, but an exciting one nonetheless.

“Shit,” she breathes.

Todd looks at her. “What’s wrong?”

She thinks on the spot, searching for the first white lie that comes to mind. “I forgot something at work and need to run to Dorothy’s really quick—”

“Seriously?” Angela says with raised brows. “What about the flowers? Are you sure you want to go with the blue and yellow—”

“Yes.” Sloan drifts away from the three of them, who are all wearing various degrees of surprise on their faces.

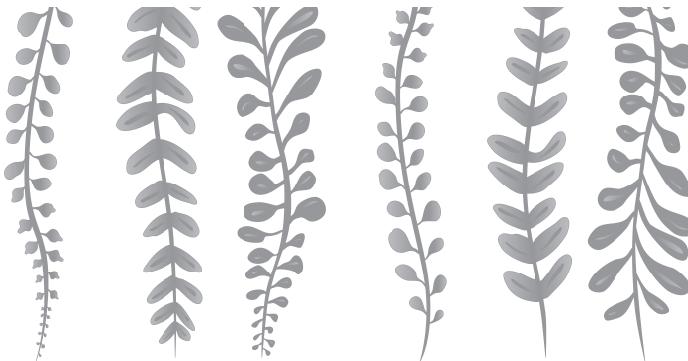
A frazzled Todd steps forward. He knows there’s nothing about the restaurant where Sloan works that would require her to drop everything and report for duty like this. “Let me drive you, at least.”

“You biked here from work, though,” Sloan replies.

Todd remembers that she’s right.

“I’ll be fine.” Sloan swings the florist’s door open to leave. “See you at home in thirty.”

With adrenaline pumping in her veins, Sloan takes off to her dad’s old house before rationality kicks in and changes her mind.



CHAPTER 3

Morris

FOR YEARS, MORRIS'S NUMBER ONE complaint about his husband was that Fred had too much *stuff*—too many nearly identical cardigans in their closet; too many knickknacks collecting dust; too many forgotten can openers buried in the backs of kitchen drawers.

So as Morris stands next to his dining room table—which had been the graveyard for all the things Fred would “find a place for later” but never did—he’s surprised that seeing its surface this spotless makes him sad. The only item that remains is Morris’s planner, opened to the current month of May, which makes him feel even worse, as there’s just a single social event penciled in. Morris likely won’t go to the drive-in anyway.

Morris hears a meow and looks down. “What?” he asks Rascal, the black cat who lives up to his name. “You can’t be hungry again already.” An offended Rascal turns and trots into the living room, and Morris reluctantly follows. What else does he have to do?

Morris spends considerably less time in the living room since Fred died. Of all the spaces in this house, Fred’s fingerprints linger in the

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living room the most, at least in Morris's head. Now it's just as tidy as any other room, save for Morris's collection of history books. But even with the lack of shelf space relegating Bob Woodward's best-sellers to the floor, the level of living room clutter is night and day compared to a year ago.

Fred was notorious for abandoning his shoes on the rug instead of leaving them by the door, which wouldn't have been as big an issue if they weren't caked in mud from an early morning of bird-watching. He usually had a jigsaw puzzle spread out across the coffee table, too. Fred would sit in the same spot on the sofa completing it every night as he and Morris watched *Jeopardy!* together. "Your answer isn't more correct the louder you shout it," Morris once reminded him, convinced Chicagoans must've heard Fred's screaming about the Shang Dynasty across Lake Michigan.

In the room with the most Fred fingerprints left behind, the front window nook, specifically, feels like Fred's happy place. Until Fred's happy place doesn't feel so sad, Morris will continue to avoid it.

It's the coziest spot in the house, though, even Morris would admit. A three-sided window pops out into the front yard, creating a built-in wooden bench where Fred would house his plants. There must have been at least a dozen there when Fred died, but now just two remain. There's the old one with tall narrow leaves that Fred got for the house shortly after they moved in together, and the smaller spunky guy with bright red leaves. Don't ask Morris what kinds of plants they are, though; he taught high schoolers American history for thirty years, not biology.

At this point, Morris is convinced the tall one and the red one are immortal, having outlived all the others through the past six months

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of sporadic care bordering on neglect. It's not that Morris *wants* to murder Fred's houseplants, it's just that Morris's thumb apparently isn't green enough to keep them alive—especially when he'd rather be anywhere else besides hovering at the front window.

Once Morris spots Rascal snoozing on the back of the sofa, he's reminded that there's no reason for him to have slumped his way in here other than the demands of a discontented cat. So he turns with a sigh and wanders into the bathroom, where his toes stick slightly to the cool tile floor, then stares down at his nemesis: the scale. Apparently, he should step onto it more often, according to his doctor, so he gives it a go. The digital numbers bounce up and down like he's playing a carnival game before blinking a dissatisfying result. Morris steps off and grumbles about water weight, as if saying his excuse out loud somehow makes it correct. It's almost as absurd as thinking the louder someone yells answers during *Jeopardy!*, the more right they are.

Morris turns toward the mirror and studies the ancient man staring back. He's accepted that a selfie he'd snap today would look completely appropriate next to the definition of *old guy* in Webster's dictionary. He pats down his snow-white hair and pushes up the brown glasses resting on the tip of his nose. Morris's nose hairs have grown even more unruly, too, he notices. If Fred were here, he'd be nagging Morris about buying a new trimmer.

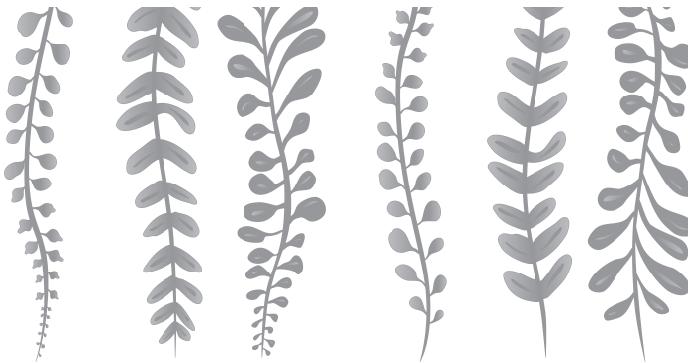
He feels watchful eyes coming from the doorway and turns to find Rascal staring up at him. "What do you want, sleepyhead?"

Morris hears music blasting and tires coming to a halt out front. He assumes it's a neighbor arriving home until the nearby *bang* of a closing car door confirms someone is in his driveway. Morris steps

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out of the bathroom and cautiously cranes his neck to see into the front yard. He blinks a few times in surprise, because surely that can't be Fred's youngest daughter striding toward the porch.

He hasn't seen Sloan since the funeral. He hasn't seen any of the Hopperbots since then, in fact. She's knocking on the front door before Morris can believe his own two eyes.



CHAPTER 4

Sloan

SLOAN IS STANDING ON WHAT had been her dad's front porch as the panic begins to set in. She rarely came to this house when Fred was alive, so she didn't give much thought about this being her first time back since his death. But as her heart pounds and her eyes withhold tears for the second time this hour, Sloan realizes that maybe she should have.

"What the hell am I doing?" she mutters, glancing around the neighborhood anxiously.

Never mind the fact that her family despises Morris, and hell freezing over is more likely than Beth's approving of him to walk Sloan down the aisle. In the five minutes since Sloan hatched her brilliant plan to ask Morris, she hasn't considered if he'll even *want* to be part of the ceremony—or attend the wedding at all.

This is insanity. Is it too late to make a run for it?

She's about to sprint back to her car when the front door opens and Morris's face appears. "Hi, Mr. Warner!" Sloan bellows with an inappropriate level of enthusiasm. Her nerves are immediately

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replaced with embarrassment. “I mean,” she attempts to clarify, as her face turns red, “hi, Morris.”

Technically, they’re the same person. But Mr. Warner was her US history teacher in high school, and Morris is her dead dad’s widower. There’s a world of difference.

Fortunately, he doesn’t seem to care. “Hi, Sloan,” he says. “What a nice surprise.”

He remembers her name, at the very least.

Morris’s voice is much softer than she remembers it from class. He even looks older than he did at the funeral a few months ago. It seems like it should’ve taken longer for the remaining streaks of brown hair on Morris’s head to shift to white and the wrinkles across his face to deepen as quickly as they have. He’s still in his pajamas, too, which is a sharp contrast to the suit and tie Morris had on the last time Sloan saw him, standing near the casket. Also, was he always this short?

Sloan waits for him to invite her in, but he doesn’t.

“Sorry to just . . . you know,” she says, “show up.”

“Don’t apologize.” He smiles. “What brings you over?”

Sloan’s insides twist at the awkwardness of it all. Now that she’s thinking more clearly, Sloan realizes she can’t be honest about why she’s suddenly standing on his front porch. But she can at least tell a half-truth.

“This might sound strange,” Sloan says, “but I was at the Flower Factory and being there reminded me of my dad. You know how he loved his houseplants.”

Morris nods.

“So I had the thought, ‘I wonder how Morris is doing,’” she continues, “and . . . voila.” Sloan curtsies uncomfortably. “Here I am.”