THE COUSINS

KAREN M. McMANUS



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

www.penguin.co.uk
www.puffin.co.uk
www.ladybird.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the USA by Delacorte Press
and in Great Britain by Penguin Books 2020

001

Text copyright © Karen M. McManus, LLC, 2020

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

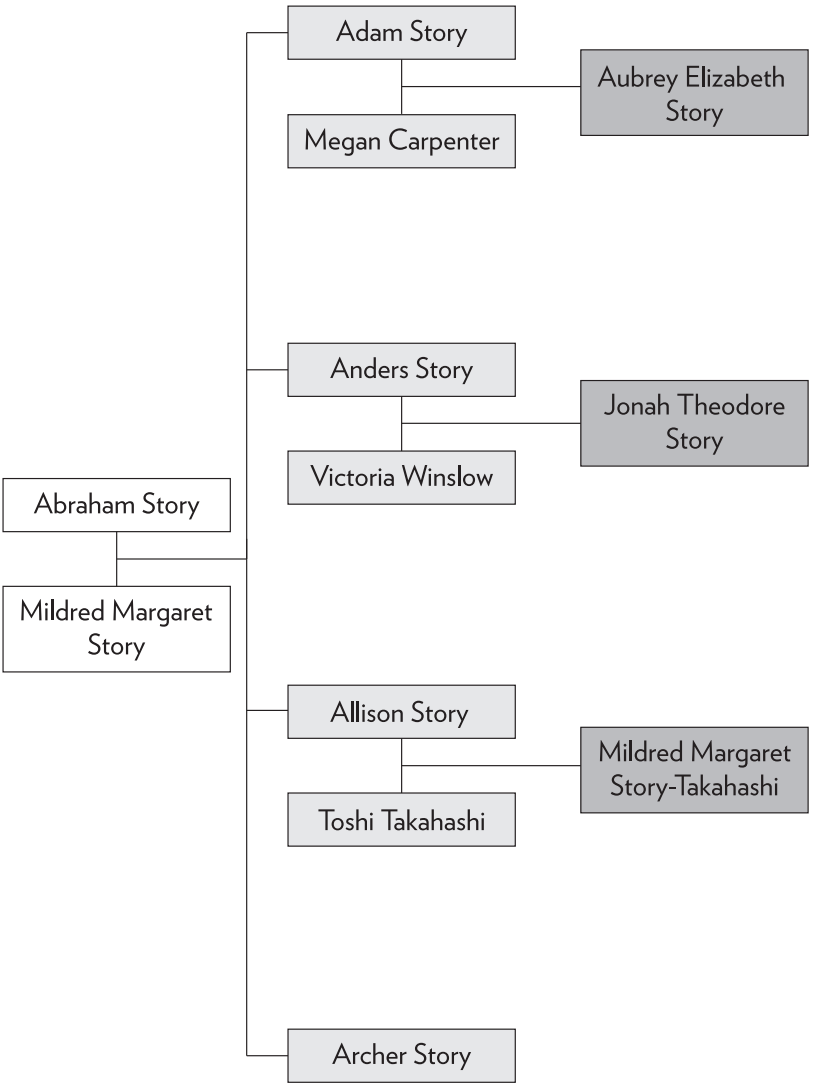
ISBN: 978–0–241–37694–2

All correspondence to:
Penguin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

THE STORY FAMILY TREE



CHAPTER ONE

MILLY

I'm late for dinner again, but this time it's not my fault. There's a mansplainer in my way.

"Mildred? That's a grandmother's name. But not even a *cool* grandmother." He says it like he thinks he's being clever. Like in all my seventeen years, no one else has ever noticed that my name isn't the fashionable kind of classic. It took a Wall Street investment banker with slicked-back hair and a pinkie ring to render that particular bit of social commentary.

I sip the dregs of my seltzer. "I was, in fact, named after my grandmother," I say.

I'm at a steak house in midtown at six o'clock on a rainy April evening, doing my best to blend with the happy hour crowd. It's a game my friends and I play sometimes; we go to restaurant bars so we don't have to worry about getting carded at the door. We wear our simplest dresses and extra makeup. We order seltzer water with lime—"in a small glass, please, I'm

not that thirsty"—and gulp it down until there's almost nothing left. Then we wait to see if anyone offers to buy us a drink.

Somebody always does.

Pinkie Ring smiles, his teeth almost fluorescent in the dim light. He must take his whitening regimen very seriously. "I like it. Quite a contrast for such a beautiful young woman." He edges closer, and I catch a headache-inducing whiff of strong cologne. "You have a very interesting look. Where are you from?"

Ugh. That's marginally better than the *What are you?* question I get sometimes, but still gross. "New York," I say pointedly. "You?"

"I mean originally," he clarifies, and that's it. I'm done.

"New York," I repeat, and stand up from my stool. It's just as well he didn't talk to me until I was about to leave, because a cocktail before dinner wasn't one of my better ideas. I catch my friend Chloe's eye across the room and wave good-bye, but before I can extract myself, Pinkie Ring tips his glass toward mine. "Can I get you another of whatever that is?"

"No thank you. I'm meeting someone."

He pulls back, brow furrowed. *Very* furrowed. In a behind-on-his-Botox sort of way. He also has creases lining his cheeks and crinkles around his eyes. He's way too old to be hitting on me, even if I were the college student I occasionally pretend to be. "What are you wasting my time for, then?" he grunts, his gaze already roving over my shoulder.

Chloe likes the happy hour game because, she says, high school boys are immature. Which is true. But sometimes I think we might be better off not knowing how much worse they can get.

I pluck the lime out of my drink and squeeze it. I'm not aim-

ing for his eye, exactly, but I'm still a little disappointed when the juice spatters only his collar. "Sorry," I say sweetly, dropping the lime into the glass and setting it on the bar. "Normally I wouldn't bother. But it's so dark in here. When you first came over, I thought you were my dad."

As if. My dad is way better-looking, and also: not a creep. Pinkie Ring's mouth drops open, but I scoot past him and out the door before he can reply.

The restaurant I'm going to is just across the street, and the hostess smiles when I come through the door. "Can I help you?"

"I'm meeting someone for dinner? Allison?"

Her gaze drops to the book in front of her and a small crease appears between her eyes. "I'm not seeing—"

"Story-Takahashi?" I try. My parents have an unusually amicable divorce, and Exhibit A is that Mom continues to use both last names. "Well, it's still *your* name," she'd said four years ago when the divorce was finalized. "And I've gotten used to it."

The crease between the hostess's eyes deepens. "I don't see that either."

"Just Story, then?" I try. "Like in a book?"

Her brow clears. "Oh! Yes, there you are. Right this way."

She grabs two menus and winds her way between white-covered tables until we reach a corner booth. The wall beside it is mirrored, and the woman sitting on one side is sipping a glass of white wine while surreptitiously checking out her reflection, smoothing flyaways in her dark bun that only she can see.

I drop into the seat across from her as the hostess places oversized red menus in front of us. "So it's Story tonight?" I ask.

My mother waits until the hostess leaves to answer. "I wasn't

in the mood to repeat myself," she sighs, and I raise a brow. Mom usually makes a point of pushing back on anyone who acts like they can't figure out how to spell or pronounce Dad's Japanese last name.

"Why?" I ask, even though I know she won't tell me. There are multiple levels of Milly criticism to get through first.

She puts her glass down, causing almost a dozen gold bangles to jingle on her wrist. My mother is vice president of public relations for a jewelry company, and wearing the season's must-haves is one of the perks of her job. She eyes me up and down, taking in my heavier-than-usual makeup and navy sheath. "Where are you coming from that you're so dressed up?"

The bar across the street. "A gallery thing with Chloe," I lie. Chloe's mother owns an art gallery uptown, and our friends spend a lot of time there. Allegedly.

Mom picks up her glass again. Sips, flicks her eyes toward the mirror, pats her hair. When it's down it falls in dark waves, but, as she likes to tell me, pregnancy changed its texture from smooth to coarse. I'm pretty sure she's never forgiven me for that. "I thought you were studying for finals."

"I was. Before."

Her knuckles turn white around the glass, and I wait for it. *Milly, you cannot exit your junior year with less than a B average. You're on the cusp of mediocrity, and your father and I have invested far too much for you to waste your opportunity like that.*

If I were even a little musically inclined, I'd start a band called Cusp of Mediocrity in honor of Mom's favorite warning. I've been hearing some version of that speech for three years. Prescott Academy churns out Ivy League students like some kind of blue-blood factory, and it's the bane of my mother's

existence that I'm always ranked solidly in the bottom half of my class.

The lecture doesn't come, though. Instead, Mom reaches out her free hand and pats mine. Stiffly, like she's a marionette with a novice handler. "Well, you look very pretty."

Instantly, I'm on the defensive. It's strange enough that my mother wanted to meet me for dinner, but she *never* compliments me. Or touches me. All of this suddenly feels like a setup for something I'd rather not hear. "Are you sick?" I blurt out. "Is Dad?"

She blinks and withdraws her hand. "What? No! Why would you ask that?"

"Then why—" I break off as a smiling server appears beside the table, filling our water glasses from a silver pitcher.

"And how are you ladies this evening? Can I tell you about our specials?"

I study Mom covertly over the top of my menu as the server rattles them off. She's definitely tense, still clutching her near-empty wineglass in a death grip, but I realize now that I was wrong to expect bad news. Her dark-blue eyes are bright, and the corners of her mouth are *almost* turned up. She's anticipating something, not dreading it. I try to imagine what might make my mother happy besides me magically A-plussing my way to valedictorian at Prescott Academy.

Money. That's all it could be. Mom's life revolves around it—or more specifically, around not having enough of it. My parents both have good jobs, and my dad, despite being remarried, has always been generous with child support. His new wife, Surya, is the total opposite of a wicked stepmother in all possible ways, including finances. She's never begrudged Mom the big checks he sends every month.

But *good* doesn't cut it when you're trying to keep up in Manhattan. And it's not what my mother grew up with.

A job promotion, I decide. That must be it. Which is excellent news, except for the part where she's going to remind me that she got it through hard work and oh, by the way, why can't I work harder at literally everything.

"I'll have the Caesar salad with chicken. No anchovies, dressing on the side," Mom says, handing her menu to the server without really looking at him. "And another glass of the Langlois-Chateau, please."

"Very good. And the young lady?"

"Bone-in rib eye, medium rare, and a jumbo baked potato," I tell him. I might as well get a good meal out of whatever's about to go down.

When he leaves, my mother drains her wineglass and I gulp my water. My bladder's already full from the seltzer at the bar, and I'm about to excuse myself for the restroom when Mom says, "I got the most interesting letter today."

There it is. "Oh?" I wait, but when she doesn't continue, I prod, "From who?"

"Whom," she corrects automatically. Her fingers trace the base of her glass as her lips curve up another half notch. "From your grandmother."

I blink at her. "From Baba?" Why that merits this kind of buildup, I have no idea. Granted, my grandmother doesn't contact Mom often, but it's not unprecedented. Baba is the type of person who likes to forward articles she's read to anyone she thinks might be interested, and she still does that with Mom postdivorce.

"No. Your other grandmother."

"What?" Now I'm truly confused. "You got a letter from—Mildred?"

I don't have a nickname for my mother's mother. She's not Grandma or Mimi or Nana or *anything* to me, because I've never met her.

"I did." The server returns with Mom's wine, and she takes a long, grateful sip. I sit in silence, unable to wrap my head around what she just told me. My maternal grandmother loomed large over my childhood, but as more of a fairy-tale figure than an actual person: the wealthy widow of Abraham Story, whose great-something-grandfather came over on the *Mayflower*. My ancestors are more interesting than any history book: the family made a fortune in whaling, lost most of it in railroad stocks, and eventually sank what was left into buying up real estate on a crappy little island off the coast of Massachusetts.

Gull Cove Island was a little-known haven for artists and hippies until Abraham Story turned it into what it is today: a place where rich and semifamous people spend ridiculous amounts of money pretending they're getting back to nature.

My mother and her three brothers grew up on a giant beachfront estate named Catmint House, riding horses and attending black-tie parties like they were the princess and princes of Gull Cove Island. There's a picture on our apartment mantel of Mom when she was eighteen, stepping out of a limousine on her way to the Summer Gala her parents threw every year at their resort. Her hair is piled high, and she's wearing a white ball gown and a gorgeous diamond teardrop necklace. Mildred gave that necklace to my mother when she turned seventeen, and I used to think Mom would pass it along to me when I hit the same birthday.

Didn't happen. Even though Mom never wears it herself.

My grandfather died when Mom was a senior in high school. Two years later, Mildred disowned all of her children. She cut them off both financially and personally, with no explanation except for a single-sentence letter sent two weeks before Christmas through her lawyer, a man named Donald Camden who'd known Mom and her brothers their entire lives:

You know what you did.

Mom has always insisted that she has no clue what Mildred meant. "The four of us had gotten . . . selfish, I suppose," she'd tell me. "We were all in college then, starting our own lives. Mother was lonely with Father gone, and she begged us to visit all the time. But we didn't want to go." She calls her parents that, *Mother* and *Father,* like the heroine in a Victorian novel. "None of us came back for Thanksgiving that year. We'd all made other plans. She was furious, but . . ." Mom always got a pensive, faraway look on her face then. "That's such a small thing. Hardly unforgivable."

If Abraham Story hadn't set up educational trusts for Mom and her brothers, they might not have graduated college. Once they did, though, they were on their own. At first, they regularly tried to reestablish contact with Mildred. They hounded Donald Camden, whose only response was the occasional email reiterating her decision. They sent invitations to their weddings, and announcements when their kids were born. They even took turns showing up on Gull Cove Island, where my grandmother still lives, but she would never see or speak to them. I used to imagine that one day she'd waltz into our apartment, dripping diamonds and furs, and announce that she'd come for me, her namesake.

She'd whisk me to a toy store and let me buy whatever I wanted, then hand me a sack of money to bring home to my parents.

I'm pretty sure my mother had the same fantasy. Why else would you saddle a twenty-first-century girl with a name like Mildred? But my grandmother, with the help of Donald Camden, stonewalled her children at every turn. Eventually, they stopped trying.

Mom is looking at me expectantly, and I realize she's waiting for an answer. "You got a letter from Mildred?" I ask.

She nods, then clears her throat before answering. "Well. To be more precise, *you* did."

"I did?" My vocabulary has shrunk to almost nothing in the past five minutes.

"The envelope was addressed to me, but the letter was for you."

A decade-old image pops into my head: me with my long-lost grandmother, filling a shopping cart to the rim with stuffed animals while dressed like we're going to the opera. Tiaras and all. I push the thought aside and grope for more words. "Is she . . . Does she . . . Why?"

My mother reaches into her purse and pulls out an envelope, then pushes it across the table toward me. "Maybe you should just read it."

I lift the flap and pull out a folded sheet of thick, cream-colored paper that smells faintly of lilac. The top is engraved with the initials MMS—Mildred Margaret Story. Our names are almost exactly the same, except mine has Takahashi at the end. The short paragraphs are typewritten, followed by a cramped, spidery signature.

Dear Milly,

We have, of course, never met. The reasons are complex, but as years progress they become less important than they once were. As you stand poised on the threshold of adulthood, I find myself curious to know you.

I own a property called Gull Cove Resort that is a popular vacation destination on Gull Cove Island. I wish to invite you and your cousins, Jonah and Aubrey, to spend this summer living and working at the resort. Your parents worked there as teenagers and found the environment both stimulating and enriching.

I am sure you and your cousins would reap similar benefits from a summer at Gull Cove Resort. And since I am not well enough to host guests for any length of time, it would afford me the opportunity to get to know you.

I hope you will accept my invitation. The resort's summer hire coordinator, Edward Franklin, will handle all necessary travel and logistics, and you may contact him at the email address below.

Very sincerely yours,
Mildred Story

I read it twice, then refold the paper and lay it on the table. I don't look up, but I can feel my mother's eyes on me as she waits for me to speak. Now I really have to pee, but I need to loosen my throat with yet more water before the words can burst out of me. "Is this bullshit for real?"

Whatever my mother might have been expecting me to say, it wasn't that. "Excuse me?"

"Let me get this straight," I say, my cheeks warming as I stuff the letter back into its envelope. "This woman I have never met—who cut you out of her life without looking back, who didn't come to your wedding or my christening or anything related to this family for the past twenty-four years, who hasn't called or emailed or written until, oh, five minutes ago—this woman wants me to *work at her hotel*?"

"I don't think you're looking at this the right way, Milly."

My voice rises to a near shriek. "How am I supposed to look at it?"

"Shhh," Mom hisses, her eyes darting around the room. If there's one thing she hates, it's a scene. "As an opportunity."

"For *what*?" I ask. She hesitates, twisting her cocktail ring—nothing like the five-carat emerald stunner I've seen on my grandmother's hand in old pictures—and suddenly I get it. "No, wait—don't answer that. That's the wrong question. I should have said for *who.*"

"Whom," my mother says. She seriously cannot help herself.

"You think this is a chance to get back into her good graces, don't you? To be—re-inherited."

"That's not a word."

"God, Mom, would you give it a rest? My grammar is not the issue!"

"I'm sorry," Mom says, and that surprises me so much that I don't finish the rant I was building toward. Her eyes are still bright, but now they're watery, too. "It's just—this is my mother, Milly. I've waited years to hear from her. I don't know why now, or why you, or why *this,* but she's finally reaching out. If we don't take her up on it, we might not get another chance."

"Chance for what?"

"To get to know her again."

It's on the tip of my tongue to say *Who cares,* but I bite it back. I was going to follow that up with *We've been fine all this time without her,* but that's not true. We're not fine.

My mother lives at the edge of a Mildred Story–shaped hole, and has for my entire life. It's turned her into the kind of person who keeps everybody at a distance—even my dad, who I know she loved as much as she's capable of loving anyone. When I was little, I'd watch them together and wish for something as perfect. Once I got older, though, I started noticing all the little ways Mom would push Dad aside. How she'd stiffen at hugs, use work as an excuse to stay away until past our bedtimes, and beg off family outings with migraines that never bothered her in the office. Eventually, being chilly and closed off turned into criticizing absolutely everything Dad said or did. Right up to the point when she finally asked him to leave.

Now that he's gone, she does the same thing to me.

I draw a question mark in the condensation of my water glass. "You want me to go away for the entire summer?" I ask.

"You'd love it, Milly." When I snort, she adds, "No, you really would. It's a gorgeous resort, and kids apply from all over to work there. It's actually very competitive. Staff quarters are beautiful, you get full access to all the facilities—it's like a vacation."

"A vacation where I'm my grandmother's employee."

"You'd be with your cousins."

"I don't *know* my cousins." I haven't seen Aubrey since Uncle Adam's family moved to Oregon when we were five. Jonah lives in Rhode Island, which isn't that far away, but my mother and his father barely talk. The last time we all got together was for

Uncle Anders's birthday when I was eight. I only remember two things about Jonah: One, he whacked me in the head with a plastic bat and seemed disappointed when I didn't cry. And two, he blew up like a balloon when he ate an appetizer he was allergic to, even though his mother warned him to stay away from it.

"You could get to know them. You're all the same age, and none of you has any brothers or sisters. It would be nice for you to be closer."

"What, like you're close to Uncle Adam, Uncle Anders, and Uncle Archer? You guys barely talk to one another! My cousins and I have nothing in common." I shove the envelope back toward her. "I'm not doing it. I'm not a dog that'll come running just because *she* calls. And I don't want to be gone all summer."

Mom starts twisting her cocktail ring again. "I thought you might say that. And I realize it's a lot to ask. So I want to give you something in return." Her hand moves up to the chunky gold links gleaming against her black dress. "I know how much you've always loved my diamond teardrop necklace. What if I gave it to you as a thank-you?"

I sit up straighter, already imagining the necklace sparkling at my throat. I've dreamed about it for years. But I thought it would be a gift—not a *bribe.*

"Why wouldn't you just give it to me because I'm your daughter?" I've always wondered but never dared ask. Maybe because I'm afraid the answer would be the same one she gave my dad, not with her words but with her actions: *You aren't enough.*

"It's an heirloom," Mom says, like that doesn't prove my entire point. I frown as she rests one manicured hand on the edge of the envelope. She doesn't *push* it, exactly. Just sort of taps it. "I

always thought I'd give it to you when you turned twenty-one, but if you're going to spend your summer in my hometown—well, it just seems right to do it sooner."

I exhale a silent sigh and take the envelope, turning it over in my hand while Mom sips her wine, content to wait me out. I'm not sure which is more frustrating: that my mother is trying to blackmail me into spending the summer working for a grandmother I've never met, or that it's totally going to work.