

**TWO
NIGHTS
IN LISBON
CHRIS
PAVONE**



An Aries Book

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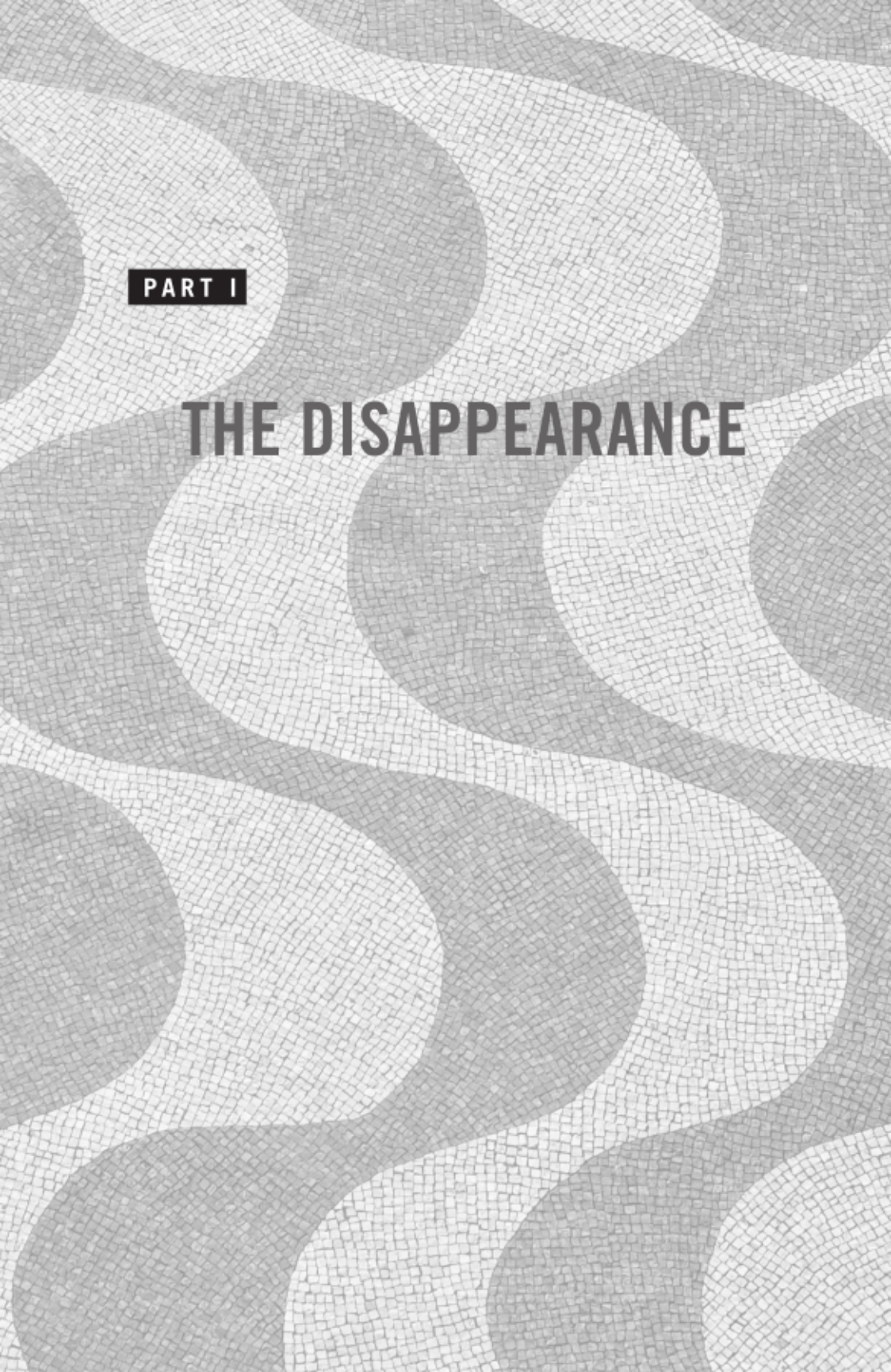


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Justice is truth in action.

—BENJAMIN DISRAELI

The background of the entire page is an abstract pattern of overlapping circles in various shades of gray. Each circle is filled with a fine, grid-like mosaic texture, creating a complex, layered visual effect.

PART I

THE DISAPPEARANCE

CHAPTER 1

LISBON, PORTUGAL

DAY 1. 7:28 A.M.

Ariel awakens, alone.

Sunlight is streaming through the gap between the shutters, casting a stark column of brightness on the wall, nearly painful to look at.

She's hot. She flings aside the sheet, toward the other side of the bed, where her new husband should be, but isn't. Her eyes jump around the room, as if hopping on stones across a stream, looking for evidence of John, but find none, plummeting her into the fast frigid water of a familiar panic: What if she's wrong about him? About this whole thing?

The bedside clock displays 7:28 in emergency red. Much later than she normally awakes, especially this time of year, the busiest months on the farm, when the birds begin chirping around four A.M., the fieldwork starts at dawn, dogs barking, men yelling above the noise of sputtering engines. It's hard to sleep through all that racket even if she wanted to.

Ariel has been an early riser ever since George was born, a matter of necessity when he was an infant, but even when the kid started sleeping later, she didn't. Waking early became a matter of policy, of character. This was how she wanted to be known, if only to herself: early to rise, early to bed, hardworking between, a serious responsible person, after a misspent youth. Worse than misspent.

Despite her quickening pulse, Ariel is still groggy, her mind muddy. Last night must have really walloped her, the dehydration and generalized exhaustion of international travel, the jet lag, the food and wine and sex, the sleeping pill that John ultimately foisted upon her.

He'd risen from bed, both of them slicked with sweat, spent. He turned to stare down at Ariel, to admire her, naked, sprawled, a pink bloom spreading across her heaving chest and up her neck and into her cheeks, like a rapidly advancing infection. He leaned down toward her, but stopped just before his mouth met hers, stared into her eyes, making her ache until she could no longer wait for him, and she craned her neck upward for a kiss that was long and deep and almost too much, setting off a fresh wave of tingles to accompany those that hadn't yet completely subsided. Her skin felt so alive, all prickling nerve endings, pure arousal.

Ariel watched him move slowly through the dark room, taking care not to trip, not to stub his toe. He stood naked at the window, working the old shutter's apparatus until he found the groove, the satisfying click as the whole thing came unlocked. He grasped one shutter in each hand, and gently pushed the large panels apart until fully spread, wide open. A familiar physical phrasing, the softest touch of fingertips, as if asking permission.

Exactly what Ariel has always wanted most. Exactly what she had gotten least. Until now.

Ariel hears something out there, beyond the morning-disarrayed bedroom.

"John?"

No answer.

She walks tentatively toward the ghost of the sound, then stops short at the suite's door, aware that she's wearing nothing but a T-shirt. She glances down to see how much it covers. Not quite enough. She hears the same noise again, it's definitely from out there, just on the far side of the door.

"John?"

"*Desculpe.*" It's a woman's voice, muffled by the door. "*Serviço de limpeza.*"

Ariel peers through the peephole: a chambermaid, organizing her cart.

"Desculpe," she repeats.

Ariel turns away from the door. She looks around the sitting room, whose walls are painted a shade of pale gray that's so luminescent it's like being inside an oyster shell. Her eyes fall upon last night's nightcap glasses, the sofa pillows strewn on the floor, the kicked-off shoes. The couch is where they'd started up, still clothed but unzipped, unbuttoned, pushed aside, caressed and fondled, licked and sucked, knees bumped and rug-burned until John said, "Let's move to the bed," his voice quavering with excitement. Ariel couldn't even speak.

She checks her phone: nothing. No notification, no alert, just the locked-home-screen photo of a little boy hugging two big dogs, a picture that's four years old but so perfect that Ariel can't bear to replace it with something newer but not as ideal.

It's still two-thirty in the morning on the East Coast, where nearly everyone she knows lives. Ariel hasn't even received any fresh spam. She launches the app that tracks her family's devices—her son's cell, her husband's, her own. The data takes a long time to load, to locate the disparate geo-positions. The first bubble that appears is her own, AP, right here in the center of Lisbon. Then her son's, GP, exactly where he belongs in the middle of the night, four thousand miles away, asleep, no doubt with at least one of the dogs—Scotch—in his bed, probably Mallomar too. The dogs are very loyal to George, and vice versa. The narrow bed can get awfully crowded, a pile of smelly mammals, all of them pressed up against one another, dreaming.

The app still hasn't found John, his JW icon "Locating . . ." but then surrenders, admits failure, "Location not available" in the passive voice, as if she should blame it on the device, or the person, or the vagaries of the ether, anything except the app itself. Even apps don't want to accept blame.

Ariel has been awake for three minutes.

When she left her first husband nearly fifteen years ago, Ariel left behind everything else too. She emptied her life completely and started from scratch, filling her new existence one piece at a time—a new old house

in a quiet new place, a new baby, a new crazy dog and then a crazier second dog, a new hairstyle and wardrobe, a new career in a new field, new friends and hobbies, a new way of holding herself, of interacting with the world and inviting the world to interact with her. She no longer wanted to move through life first and foremost and always and only as an attractive woman.

It was just recently that she realized she was ready to add the final new piece, to complete her full new life, which wasn't so new anymore, and maybe not quite full enough. She can't help but wonder if she conjured John from her desire, or if it was the other way around.

He had remained standing at the window for a long time last night, uplit from the streetlamps that cast a distended shadow across the ceiling, a creepy Munch-like shape in the eerie bluish light of city night, causing Ariel a quick spasm of fear, an unwelcome old feeling that sneaks up on her now and then, surprise attacks that are surprising only in their timing. She knows they're coming, just not exactly when.

Ariel had closed her eyes tight, and inhaled deeply, trying to focus on the immediate physical sensations—the warm breeze blowing up from the Tagus, the distant scream of a seagull, a whiff of seaside air, salty and maybe a little fishy, the needles and pins of her hot prickled skin. She exhaled through her mouth, slow and long and completely in control. It was all about control.

She opened her eyes, ending the little drama that had existed purely in her mind, a private world of panic.

Ariel had been fearless when she was young, which is when people tend to be bold. She'd been an actor, after all. What's bolder? But then life conspired against her audacity, sapped her courage, shattered her confidence that she could move safely through the world. She couldn't. She didn't.

John was still at the open window, his nude form at once very familiar—she felt like she'd explored every inch of his body, with her eyes, with the tips of her fingers, the tip of her tongue—but still so foreign, as any other body is, any other person. She could know what he looked like, what he tasted like; she did. But not how he felt, not what he thought.

Years ago, Ariel had lost all faith in her ability to see other people clearly. She'd been so sure about her first husband, yet ultimately so wrong, the sort of wrong that's shockingly obvious in hindsight. Ariel had seen only what Bucky had wanted her to see, what he'd put in front of her to see. She'd been an unwitting accessory to his self-misrepresentation until it was too late. Not just too late for that relationship, but for all of her relationships. She'd lost confidence in her own judgment, in her ability to see anyone's true self. For a long time, she'd barely tried.

Did she learn anything? Of course. But all lessons fade if you don't keep up your studies. Calculus, French, colonial history, Greek myths, Ariel doesn't remember any of this. She can't remember what calculus even *is*. A couple of years ago, she looked up the word in the dictionary, but that didn't clarify a damn thing.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

John shifted position, turned toward her, angled his face away from the streetlight. Now she could see even less of his expression. Nothing, really.

"You know," he said. "Just about tomorrow."

Tomorrow was here. Tomorrow was now.

She'll shower, that's what she'll do. She'll shower and she'll dress herself in today's outfit, which she chose a week ago, deliberating through her closet with a little chart of what clothes she'd need, for what purposes, on what days of this short trip. Today it will be a mid-length skirt and a peasant blouse, simple, unfussy, yet sexy. Ariel's normal outfit is jeans and a T-shirt and no makeup whatsoever. But this Lisbon trip is not normal, so she'll put on makeup, and a low-hanging pendant necklace, accentuating parts of her body that she usually doesn't.

Then she'll open the door and find the American newspaper on the doormat, with the stories about the memorial service for the vice president, and about the man who has been nominated to succeed him, news that's been dominating American media for months.

Ariel will scoop up this newspaper, and walk carefully down the hotel's wide staircase, taking her time on the slick marble, her hand trailing the

wooden banister that has been buffed smooth and shiny from two centuries of friction, the long-term degradations at the hand of man. She'll stride into the large sunny breakfast room that's perched above the bustling square ringed by elegant buildings and those lethal old trams clanging and screeching on their tracks, disgorging early-bird tourists and bleary-eyed commuters munching on their breakfast *pastéis*, their eyes drawn up to the hotel's elegant façade, where curtains are billowing through the first floor's middle set of French doors just in front of the low table where Ariel and John have eaten their breakfast two days in a row already, it's their table, and that's where her new husband will be, sitting there with his coffee and his newspapers, waiting for her, looking up with that grin—

He isn't.