

Praise for
The Comeback

“Raw and nuanced . . . slices straight down to the nerve. A chilling exposé unfolding in real time—I dare anyone to read it without squirming in suspense and in recognition.”

—Chandler Baker, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *Whisper Network*

“A spectacularly compelling story of a young woman finding the courage to take back control of her life. . . . This is a novel that will stay with me.”

—Sarah Haywood, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *The Cactus*

“This of-the-moment story follows Grace Turner, a young Hollywood actress who disappeared at the height of her fame for an entire year, and her return to life in LA. . . . Full of dark secrets and suspense, this darkly funny tale is full of empowerment, courage and vengeance.” —CNN

“A compelling tale of power and justice in a post-#MeToo world.” —*Harper's Bazaar*

“Berman's novel of a young woman recruited far too early in her life into the Hollywood machine may be the smartest book I've read in the past few years about monstrous men.” —Literary Hub

“A post-Me Too novel with a side of revenge.” —*Entertainment Weekly*

"A raw, gripping and spellbinding account of dangerous secrets, a pining for retribution, and the power of women."

—Karma Brown, author of *Recipe for a Perfect Wife*

"A propulsive, timely study of a complicated young woman trying to put herself back together again in Hollywood's glare. Berman's storytelling is at times darkly funny, at times rage-inducing, always gripping. I read it in twenty-four hours."

—Laura Hankin, author of *Happy & You Know It*

"Perfectly of the moment, it's gripping, witty and deeply satisfying—the kind of book you lose sleep over and cancel plans for. I loved it."

—Katie Lowe, author of *The Furies*

"The perfect mix of timely topics and tabloid drama. We couldn't put this book down."

—*Bad on Paper* podcast

"[A] mix of a thrilling page-turner with the importance of the #MeToo movement and standing up for what is right. . . . It weaves heavy issues into something unputdownable and enjoyable to read."

—The Stripe

"In a fiction debut that's all too timely, *The Comeback* is about Grace Turner, a young actress who returns to Hollywood after retreating from the public eye."

—Betches

the comeback

ella berman



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Things I remember from the accident: his voice—low and gentle, despite everything else about him. The feel of his hand on my leg just before I do it. A familiar something prickling through my body, too complex to label. The full moon hanging cleanly in the sky for the first time in a while. When I finally turn to look at him, he laughs because he doesn't think I'll go through with it. If I really think about it, this is what makes me do it. One small jerk of the wheel and then that perfect in-between moment just after we clear the road but before we start to fall. The sound of Tom Petty's voice as we crash down, down, tumbling to the bottom of the earth. A piercing, jagged tear, and then nothing but stillness.

Before

CHAPTER ONE

Six Weeks Earlier

They recognize me when I'm at CVS buying diet pills for my mom, the only kind that don't make her lose her mind.

"Aren't you Grace Turner?"

The woman is pleased with herself, a red flush climbing her neck and bursting proudly across her cheeks. Her companion is smaller, wiry, with narrow eyes, and I already understand that she's the type who will need me to prove it somehow, as if I have anything left to prove.

"Grace Hyde," I correct, smiling politely, *humbly*, before turning back to the staggering array of options in front of me. The one my mom likes has a cartoon frog standing on a set of scales on the box.

"Do you live around here now?" the first one asks hungrily. She's already terrified that she'll forget something when she recounts the story to her friends.

"I'm staying with my parents." Maybe I'm in the wrong section.

"What was your last movie, anyway?" This from the smaller one, obviously. She's scowling at me and I find myself warming to her. It's hard to find a woman who still believes that the world

owes her anything. Her friend, who has been shifting from foot to foot like she needs to take a piss, jumps into action.

"Your last film was *Lights of Berlin*. You were nominated for a Golden Globe but you'd already disappeared."

"Top marks," I say, forcing a smile before I turn around again. Then I put on a truly award-worthy performance, this one of a former child star in a supermarket, dutifully shopping for all of her mom's health care needs.

"Were you needed back at home?" The woman puts her hand on my shoulder, and I try not to flinch at the unsolicited contact. "I'm sorry. It's just how you . . . you disappeared one day. Was it because your parents needed you?"

Her relief is palpable, hanging off each word. And there it is. Because not only has this woman recognized me despite my badly bleached hair, ten extra pounds, and sweatpants from Target, and not only have I validated her very existence merely by being in the same shitty store in the same shitty town as she is, but also, after a year of waiting, I have restored her faith in something that she might never be able to articulate herself. This woman can leave the weight management aisle today believing once again that people are inherently good and, even more important, that people are inherently *predictable*. That nobody on this planet would walk out of their own perfect life one day for no discernible reason. And all this on a Monday afternoon in Anaheim no less.

"Can you do the bit? From *Lights of Berlin*?" she asks shyly, and the way her mouth tugs up more on one side when she smiles reminds me suddenly of my dad.

I look down at the floor. It would be so easy to say the line, but the words get stuck at the back of my throat like a mothball.

"You have pasta sauce on your T-shirt," the smaller one says.

CHAPTER TWO

I take the long route home, walking down identical streets lined with palm trees and fifties-style suburban houses. My parents have lived here for nearly eight years now, and I still can't believe that such a place exists outside of nostalgic teen movies and suburban nightmares. It's the kind of town where you can never get lost no matter how hard you try, and I end up, as I always do, outside my parents' neat, pale pink bungalow. It has a wooden porch in the front and a turquoise pool in the back, just like every other house on the street.

The smell of bubbling fat hits me as I step through the front door. My dad is cooking ham and eggs for dinner, with a couple of broccoli spears as a nod to my former lifestyle. I didn't realize how badly they'd been eating until I came home, but it turns out there really are a lot of ways to fry a potato. I arrived back in Anaheim a vegan, but as I watched my dad carefully prepare me a salad with ranch dressing and bacon bits on my first night, I knew I couldn't remain one for long.

My mom is watching TV on the sofa with a slight smile on her face, and I know without looking that she'll be watching the Kardashians, or the Real Housewives of anywhere else on earth. She used to be a semi-successful model back in England,

but now she's just skinny and tired for no reason since she rarely leaves the house. Instead she lives for these shows, talking about these women as if they are her friends. I try to apologize about the diet pills, and she just shakes her head slightly, which I take to mean she doesn't have the energy to discuss it. It's this new thing she's doing, rationing her energy and refusing to spend it on anything that either displeases her or causes her stress. She's selective with her energy but she'll watch hours of the Kardashians each day.

I sit next to her, carefully avoiding the pink blanket that covers her lap. I tuck my legs underneath me, and my dad passes each of us a tray with a beanbag underneath so that we can eat from our laps. My mom's tray has a watercolor picture of poppies on it, and mine has sleeping cocker spaniels. He takes a seat on the green corduroy armchair next to my mother, and I know that he will be watching her with an affectionate look on his face. The one that annoys her when she catches him doing it. Weakness has always repelled us both, which is somewhat ironic given my current state.

I eat the broccoli first from the head down to the stem, and I wish I hadn't made such a thing about salt being the devil. It's overcooked to the point of oblivion. I coat it in ketchup instead until it's nearly edible, and then I start to cut the ham. The Kardashians break for a commercial, and my mom mutes the TV. It's her way of beating the system—she will never buy a mop just because some newly promoted advertising executive thinks she needs one.

I watch my mom push a piece of ham around her plate. We all know that she's not going to eat any more than a third of it, but she keeps up the charade for my dad.

"Good day, everyone?" my dad asks, studying a cut on his thumb.

"Excellent," I say, and my mom lets out a small laugh.

"Just sublime," she says, before turning the volume back

up. I stare out the window and watch my parents' neighbor Mr. Porter arranging a Thanksgiving display at the end of his drive, soon to be replaced by an elaborate nativity scene. I already know he will back his car into each one at least three times before the New Year and will blame everyone else for it. At times like this, I can almost understand why my parents never left Anaheim. There's a comfort to be found in the inevitability of it all.

I arrived on their porch nearly a year ago, with a camouflage duffel bag filled with all the things in the world I thought I couldn't live without, most of which are now long gone. I was seven hours sober after six months that I remember only in gossamer fragments, and I saw how bad it had gotten in my parents' faces before I ever looked in a mirror.

Despite what I told the women in CVS, I haven't really been Grace Hyde since I was fourteen, so I had to work hard to make my return as seamless as possible for my parents. I observed their habits carefully before slotting myself into their schedule, drifting into their spaces only at breakfast and dinner, never in between. I even matched my rootless accent to theirs again, pulling back on my vowels wherever they did to remind them of who I was before we moved here. I, too, have learned how to worship at the altars of TV dinners and reality shows, all the while pretending to be like any other family deeply entrenched in the suburbs of Southern California.

In the middle of the day, when my dad is at work and my mom is painting her nails or watching QVC, I walk the streets of Anaheim, generally ending up at the same manicured park with a pink marble fountain in the center. I am rarely approached here when I go out, and if I am, I politely decline to take any photos. People in small cities are different—they need less from

you. I thought it would be hard to disappear, but it turns out it's the easiest thing in the world. Whoever you may have been, you're forgotten as soon as you pass the San Fernando Valley.

For my family's part, they don't question my presence. Awards season came and went, and we all pretended that my eight-year career never existed. Maybe they're respecting my privacy, or maybe they really don't care why I'm here. Maybe I lost that privilege when I moved away, or that first Christmas I didn't come home, or maybe it was all the ones after that. When I'm being honest with myself, I understand that I only came back here because I knew it would be like this—that as much as I don't know how to ask for anything, my family also wouldn't know how to give it to me.

CHAPTER THREE

The air feels crisper than it has in a long time when I wake up, and I'm feeling okay, about to go for a walk when my mom stops me.

"Grace, shall we go for a drive?" she asks.

I stand in the hall, confused because this isn't how it has worked for the last 360 days that I've been home. My parents drive to the supermarket for a food shop once a week, and I supplement this with trips to the drugstore for all the products my mom refuses to buy in front of my dad, even after thirty years of marriage: her diet pills and panty liners and my tampons. Every other Sunday we go for lunch at the Cheesecake Factory and my dad orders three Arnold Palmers and extra bread before we've even sat down. My parents share the fish tacos, while I alternate between the orange chicken and the pasta carbonara. Very occasionally my parents will drop in to a mixer at a neighbor's house, and afterward my mother will act as if she spent the entire evening being waterboarded, as opposed to just engaging in polite conversation about the best local schools or how to circumvent Anaheim building code regulations to install a sauna in your guesthouse. We do not go on drives together. It's funny how easy it is to

become a creature of habit, even when those habits are not your own.

"Do you need something?" I ask, trying not to sound suspicious.

"If you have other plans, then just say," my mom says testily, and I shake my head.

"No I don't, obviously I don't," I say as she gathers up her navy quilted coat and slips her feet into a pair of old UGG boots. The ankles cave inward heavily over the soles and I look away, focusing on zipping up my jacket instead.

When we get to her car, she hands over the keys, even though I can't actually recall ever having driven my mother anywhere in my life. I pull out of the driveway before switching on the radio, which she immediately turns down.

I glance over at her and she frowns.

"Watch the road, Grace, and stop rushing. Remember, one stop sign at a time. Who taught you how to drive?"

I try to remember who did teach me to drive, but it's lost somewhere in the blur of faces and locations that make up the latter part of my teen years. It wasn't her or my dad, is the point she's trying to make. I slow down extra early for the stop sign, to make her happy.

"So, next week it will be a year you've been staying with us." My mother rifles in her bag for something as she talks.

"So it will be," I say, rolling through another stop sign.

"And obviously your sister will be back in a couple of weeks for Thanksgiving break."

"I'm aware of that too," I say, even though I hadn't remembered. My sister, Esme, returns home from her boarding school in Northern California four times a year, and we are all forced to spend the duration of her stay pretending to be marginally higher functioning than we are, with nightly trips to various chain restaurants, where slices of anodyne predictability are served up alongside the pizza. Everything we say has to be

bright and constructive, and I have to try not to feel envious of the way my mother disguises her indifference to us all only for Esme's benefit, her interest fading again the minute my sister's left.

"So, any danger of you having figured your life out by then?"

"I'm taking a break, Mom," I say. "Who would pick up your HRT if I wasn't here? Esme can't drive."

My mom raises her eyebrows at my tone and I eventually have to turn away. I wonder if this was her big idea, to lure me into a confined space with her so that she can interrogate me about my future.

"I thought you'd like having me at home."

"This hasn't got anything to do with us," she says. "It never has."

I can't say anything now because she has played her best hand early: I was the one who left them.

"You know it's actually not healthy being back at home when you're grown up. It's called arrested development. Cynthia told me about it."

"Mrs. Porter told you about arrested development?" This surprises me, mainly because I'd always assumed this particular neighbor was borderline senile. She wears a thick bathrobe covered in fluffy yellow ducks when she waters the plants lining her drive. "You know some of the Kardashians still live at home. At least I left and *then* I came back."

"That's not even slightly true. Kim and Kanye moved in with Kris while they were redoing their house, but even the younger girls don't live there anymore. Kylie bought a house in Calabasas and flipped it for three million. Plus, she's a *mother* now."

"This is really sad, Mom. You know too much about them. You shouldn't even know where Calabasas is."

"Turn left here," my mom says, ignoring me.

I take a left, promising myself that I can turn left again in

three blocks. Thank god for the grid system. I slow down to let an old woman with a walker cross the road. My mom makes an impatient noise and I try not to smile.

"Grace, you have a house in Venice and you made 3.2 million dollars on your last movie. You can't actually be telling me that you're happy here."

"How do you know that?"

"Google," she says.

"Great, well there's taxes and commission on that, you know," I say, rubbing my eyes. "And you moved from London to a house the color of Pepto Bismol in Anaheim, but you're telling me that you're happy here."

"We're older than you. Happiness is no longer relevant," she shoots back, and I wish she hadn't because the phrase settles somewhere deep inside me. I open the window, and for once it's cold enough in Southern California that I can see my own breath.

"Okay, little miss sunshine. Let's try this. Tell me one time you've been happy since you've been back. And I'm talking genuinely happy. If you can do that, and I believe you, then I'll leave you alone."

I pull up at a traffic light and turn to look at her. My mom's hair is still red, but it's finer now and dusted with silver at the roots. Her beauty has become slightly distorted with age, as if her features are now too big for her face.

"I was happy last week when we went to Costco and they had the giant version of that hot sauce we both love."

My mother looks at me like I'm insane, and I shrug.

"Can you pull in here?" my mom asks, pointing to the parking lot of a health-food store I've never been in, and after a moment I oblige.

"I'll be two minutes," she says, and I watch as she walks into the store. While she's inside, I stare at the window display, where the same photo is repeated at least twelve times in various sizes.

The photo shows a man holding an iron dumbbell, his neck swollen with engorged veins and his body angled into a deep squat. They probably could have chosen a different position.

My mom opens the car door and slides back into the passenger seat.

"They don't have my pills here either," she says.

"Okay," I reply, unsure of what else to say. My parents do not like change. It's like they decided that the move from England would be their final adjustment in life so they just buckled in instead, waiting to grow old and die. It's easy to forget that neither of them has even turned fifty yet.

I reach out and touch her arm. She pulls away instinctively, and I realize I can't remember the last time we touched each other on purpose. Before I moved to LA, I guess.

"So are we going home?" I ask.

She nods, and tunes the radio to a country music station.

"You know those pills are basically speed," I say after a moment. "They're not good for you."

"Are you sure you're qualified to give me a lecture on drugs, Grace?"

"I don't know. Why don't you just skip a couple more meals and then we'll talk," I say reflexively, and she pulls away from me as if I've bitten her.

I keep my eyes fixed on the road ahead, and I spend the rest of the journey home thinking of all the things I could have said instead of *that*.