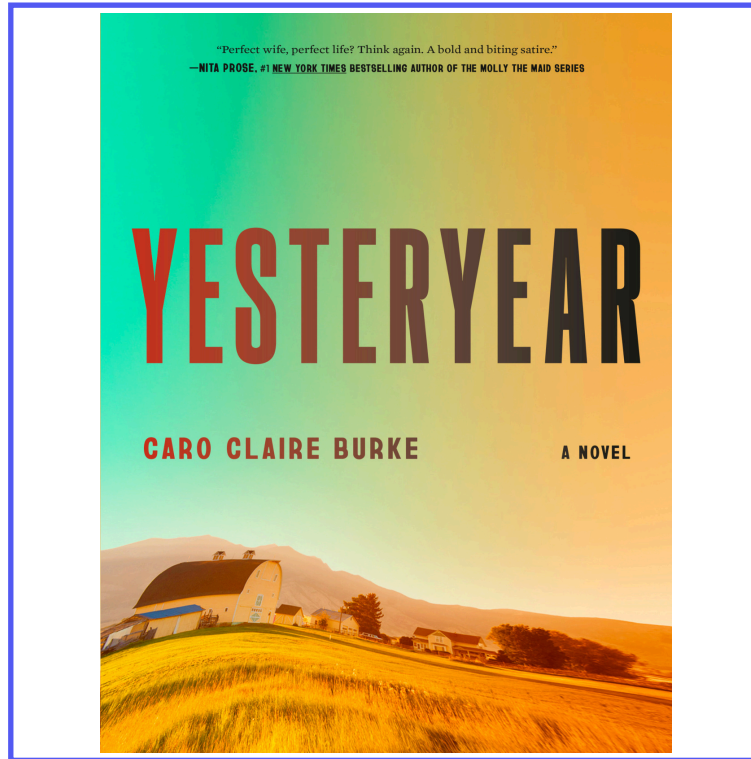




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PART ONE

THE PAST

THIS IS THE LAST DAY of the life I imagined for myself.

I woke up two minutes before my alarm went off, like usual. Five fifty-eight and *bing*: eyes wide open, ready to greet the day. I've never had a hard time waking up in the morning. Never used the snooze button, either, not once in my life. Sobriety helps. I don't drink. Discipline helps, too. I was born with spades of discipline, I'm practically overflowing with it—which is why, I think, I've never had that much trouble with anything in my life. Not motherhood, nor marriage, nor building a business, nor serving Him. All of it appeared to me as a series of tasks to be accomplished each day, at the right time, in the correct chronological order. I know it's not that easy for other people, but it really is for me.

That's why all those strangers liked me so much.

That, and the money. The money definitely helped too.

It was wintertime. January. A cold front had just blown through the pass. By my bedroom window, the radiator was puffing hot air. The sky outside was deep-as-death black, and would be for another few hours. Our farm was nestled in the rolling divots between two mountain ranges in Idaho, which meant we didn't see the sun until nine or so in the winter months. We were located five miles down a long, winding gravel country road. Not even airplanes flew overhead.

In the darkness, I listened to the distant mooing of Sassafras, our beloved dairy cow. I could tell by the pitch and register of her moans that my husband, Caleb, was milking her. Right on time. The man was good.

My husband was not disciplined before he met me. He was the youngest of five boys, the runt of the litter in an American dynasty. His father was the latest senator in a long line of U.S. senators, currently barreling through a presidential bid (third time's the charm!); his mother was a homemaker who had spent most of her life drowning in Chardonnay. Together, through a near-fatal combination of paternal neglect and maternal sympathy, they had raised Caleb to be soft and spoiled and sweet. But the only thing more

valuable than a person with God-given traits is a person who's willing to learn, and my husband, *that man*, had been willing to learn.

And who was I?

A flawless Christian woman. The manic pixie American dream girl of this nation's deepest, darkest fantasies. The mother every woman wanted to be, and the wife every man wanted to come home to. Like a nun in a porno, it didn't make sense, but also, by God: it worked.

My name is Natalie Heller Mills, and I was perfect at being alive.

In the silences between Sassafras's near-human groans of pleasure (sometimes I joked online that my husband had a bovine mistress, *ha ha!*), I could just hear the distant chicken coop chatter, that meditative *bockbockbockbockbock* that served as the white noise machine of our farm. I loved our chickens. They were as domesticated as dogs, as harmless as toddlers. Sometimes I went out to the coop just to sit with them. I liked to stroke their silky necks, let them peck softly at the feed in my cupped palms.

We'd be killing them soon. In the darkness, my mouth watered. I'd been yearning, lately, for fresh bone broth. Once you've made it from scratch, the store-bought kind tastes rancid.

Through the open crack of my bedroom door, there was a spilling of little-boy laughter. The children were down the hall, having breakfast. I closed my eyes, felt the rhythms of my house like a heartbeat. Nanny Louise—a *godsend for our family*—was at the stove, making pancakes. Producer Shannon—*my right arm*—was by the kitchen sink, getting the video equipment prepared for a long day of work. Stetson and Samuel—*my darling young men*—were sitting at the table, shoving and pulling one another in equally groggy measure. Clementine—*my eldest, the girl who made me a mother*—was at the head of the table, ignoring her brothers, reading a book. Nanny Aimee—*our second in command*—was moving through the far corners of the house, waking up each of the littles, kissing sleepy eyelids, tugging my two toddlers gently forward into the day. She would bring one to the kitchen, hand her over to Nanny Louise, and go back to get the other.

I closed my eyes and whispered my daily thanks to the Lord for everything he had provided me.

Thank you, Father, for Caleb. Thank you for the Inheritance. Thank you for Clementine, Samuel, Stetson, Jessa, Junebug, and the little angel we haven't named yet.

My hand moved instinctively to my stomach, resting at the height of the curve. I was thirty-two years old. Six months pregnant with our sixth child. It had been the easiest pregnancy to date—though all my pregnancies, relatively speaking, had been smooth. I was born to be a mother. I never felt more connected with Him than when I was tasked with carrying one of His creations.

(Do you see what I'm saying? Perfect.)

Beneath my palm, my baby girl rolled slowly to her side. My little sea creature. I loved her so much.

Thank you for watching over the farm animals, Lord, and thank you for helping us pass five million on Instagram this week. We're only a few souls away from one million on YouTube, Lord. It's through Your will, and Your will alone, that I have reached so many hearts and minds. It's in Your name that I work to spread Your truth.

A wave of nausea passed over me, and I suffered beneath the shadow. Sometimes it actually made me sick, how perfect my life was, and how good I was at living it.

On the bedside table, my phone sputtered awake. I reached over and silenced it, then threw off the sheets and got up.

—

We hadn't always had this much help. For the first few years, it had been us and the kids and the farm. When I became pregnant with my fourth, we hired Nanny Louise. When I was pregnant with my fifth, I hired Nanny Aimee, and shortly after that, we hired Producer Shannon. What we had now, in terms of help, was more than enough for the time being. It allowed me to be present with both my children and my followers in all the ways I

wanted to be at all the different points throughout the day. That's the thing about being a mother and a wife and an influencer, all at the same time: it's basically like breastfeeding three babies simultaneously. Like seducing three lovers at once.

Why don't you ever show all the help you have behind the scenes?

"We love our employees like they're family, so we go to great means to protect their privacy as they've requested. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if my social media account ended up compromising them in any way."

When I stepped into the kitchen, Producer Shannon was in the corner, fiddling with a tripod, and my four oldest children were eating breakfast at the table, each wearing a thick wool sweater. Nanny Louise was helping Jessa, our three-and-a-half-year-old, as she poured orange juice into her glass.

"I can *do it myself*," Jessa whined.

Nanny Louise, who also served as our homeschooling teacher, nodded and said, "Of course you can. Look. You're doing it right now. All by yourself. Big girl."

Jessa grinned, the verbal pronouncement of her autonomy enough to make her forget how Nanny Louise's hands never left the cup. "Big girl," she echoed. Nanny Louise tipped the glass, and my little girl drank greedily. I watched with approval as the pulp dripped down her chin. The orange juice was homemade. The tutorial would go online later this week.

"Good morning!" I said to the room. Five heads swiveled toward me. A chirpy chorus of *Morning, Mama* came in reply.

I made my way around the table, kissing each perfect cheek, ruffling each perfect head. All my children, even the boys, wore their hair long. The girls looked just like me: freckled, narrow faces, soil-dark hair, expressions

prone to penetrating seriousness. Catch one of us in a pouting moment, and you'd be forgiven for summoning images of some sixteenth-century martyr on a hunger strike. As for the boys, they looked like Caleb: ruddy cheeks, big toothy smiles. When they were all walking in a group (and they often were; the boys worshiped Caleb) they made me think of a trio of politicians in lockstep, scouring the land in search of babies to kiss.

I rarely paid attention to the differences in the children. Both the girls and the boys spoke similarly, laughed similarly. Their clothing was a rainbow of neutrals. The same pile of olive and tan and ocher had been tumbling down our growing family tree for over a decade.

It's amazing how long good cotton can last.

I walked over to my two boys, Stetson and Samuel. Stetson was eight years old, a full year younger than Samuel, but as of last summer the boys were the same height, same weight. With their shoulder-length hair and the way they seemed to do everything—run, play, do chores, shovel food into their mouths—in jerky, awkward-limbed unison, they reminded me of a pair of dressage ponies.

I rested a hand on either head as they ate their cereal with little-boy gusto, felt their skulls move around beneath my palms like possessed bulldozer levers. “What’s on the docket for today, boys?”

“Needa builda new enclosure for Sassafras,” Stetson said, mouth full.

“Mmm,” I said. “Very important. Papa will love the help.”

“Papa said I could use the nail gun.”

Samuel shoved Stetson, knocking the spoonful of cereal out of Stetson’s hand and sending it clattering to the floor. “It’s *my* turn to use the nail gun.”

“You’ll *both* use the nail gun,” I said. “Nanny Louise...?”

She nodded, wiped the pulpy juice from Jessa’s cheeks and chin, then got up to clean up the mess.

People refused to believe my babies were as amenable as they appeared online. There’s no way this is their actual life!!!!, the Angry Women would write. (That’s what Caleb and I called them. The Angry Women.) To which I would reply: absolutely nothing, of course. A mother’s main task is to protect her children from the world. There was no need for some hateful

witch in Manhattan to see how physical Samuel got with his brother (and even his sisters, sometimes), no need for them to witness Stetson's daily tantrum over arithmetic (I loved that boy, but he had not been gifted with a standard helping of brains). If the Angry Women found out about any of my children's failings, they'd go crazy with bloodthirst. They'd also be devastated. None of them realized it, of course, but they needed me as much as I needed them. It was a symbiotic relationship. I was a shark, and they were five million tiny fish, nipping at the nutrients along my belly.

Little idiots. They were desperate to eat me. They had no idea I was the one who was keeping them alive.

How does it feel to know that millions of people around the world know intimate details about your children?

"I show only very selective moments of my children's lives. And besides, none of them have *any* access to screens—have you seen the studies, by the way? Of what screen time does to children's brains? If you ask me, my children are much better off in this household, where they occasionally show up in videos for my account, than in some other household where they'd be staring at an iPad all night. I mean, really." Sympathetic cluck. "It's an epidemic. So sad. You should look into *that*."

"You're up early," I remarked to Producer Shannon as I poured my coffee.

"Couldn't sleep," she said. She was frowning at one of the knobs on the camera, twisting it one way, then the other, a grumpy expression on her face. When Shannon first showed up at the ranch, she was nineteen years old, a Barnard dropout with pink hair and a nose ring who was willing to do professional work at a student rate. Now she was twenty-one. The nose ring remained; the pink hair had been abandoned in the name of her natural brown. I wasn't sure if that was an indication of any personal identity shift so much as a practical acceptance of the realities of living an hour away

