

the haters

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THE HATERS

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*For everyone with the courage to put their work—
and themselves—out into the world.*

“*Burnt Orchid* is chilling, heart-wrenching, and painfully authentic. Camryn Lane is a brave new voice in fiction.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

Orchid Carder is poised to become the First Lady of Chicago. Her husband, Michael, has just announced his campaign for mayor and he’s the clear front-runner: young, passionate, brilliant, and with a photogenic and altruistic wife on his arm. But Orchid has a secret that could destroy his ambitions. And their marriage. Because Orchid was once an entirely different person: Orchid was once a monster.

Pushed to the limits through neglect, poverty, and abuse, Orchid created an empire on the meanest streets of LA. Collecting damaged girls like coins, she polished them and then used them as currency: to steal, to scam, even to kill. Her gang became a family of sorts, a collective of lost girls who wouldn’t survive on their own. And then, after a devastating tragedy, Orchid found the courage to claw her way out of the muck. She reclaimed a life of goodness and decency that morphed into one of privilege and opportunity. But will the past stay buried? Or will it resurface to destroy everything she has built?

With humanity and compassion, Camryn Lane traces the rise of a girl once driven to the unthinkable, and the young women who populate a dangerous world. *Burnt Orchid* is a story of struggle, redemption, and the desperate lengths people will go to in order to protect the ones they love.

1 THE LAUNCH

LOCK THE BATHROOM door, hike up my gunmetal-gray skirt, and peel my Spanx down to my knees. I have exactly six minutes to pee before I'm due onstage. My bladder has always been nervous, and the two glasses of champagne I've downed in quick succession may have been a mistake. But the bubbles have softened my jangly nerves, made everything feel warm and smudgy and effervescent. This is a celebration, after all. I mustn't forget that.

I've never been comfortable being the center of attention. There were fourteen people at my wedding, including Adrian and me. My master's degree in counseling was marked by take-out Thai food and a six-pack of beer. And when I had Liza, I politely refused a baby shower, so my colleagues delivered onesies, teddy bears, and swaddling blankets to my windowless office, one by one. Twelve years later, my best friend, Martha, threw me a divorce party. She knew I'd never allow it, knew I thought it was gross to fete the demise of an eighteen-year union, no matter how unhappy we both were. I'd walked into the restaurant expecting a quiet dinner with my oldest friend, only to be surprised by thirty drunk women wearing pink feather boas and tiaras that spelled out **DIVORCED AF**. I'd had no choice but to go along with it: to drink the sugar-rimmed Pink Señoritas, to nibble on the penis-shaped cookies (why?), to dance the

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night away to the female empowerment playlist Martha had curated. The failure of my marriage was the biggest celebration of my life. Until now.

Wriggling my Spanx back into position, I hurry to the sink to wash my hands. My reflection stares back at me, smoldering and dramatic. Liza did my makeup, my *glam*, as she called it. At seventeen, my daughter has turned her obsession with YouTube tutorials into a career as a makeup artist, but I don't feel like myself with these smoky eyes, the contoured hollows in my cheeks, the nude glossy lips.

"You're famous now," Liza had teased when I'd expressed my discomfort. "Time to step up your game."

"I'm hardly famous," I'd said, but I couldn't help but smile. I felt proud and emotional. My first novel, *Burnt Orchid*, has been out in the world for two days. The manuscript I poured my soul into for almost three years now sits on bookstore shelves, and it's the achievement of my life. When I'd first gotten the publishing offer, it had felt like success, like winning the lottery or, more aptly, the Olympics. After years of dedication, toil, and perfecting my craft, it was the ultimate accomplishment. But now the book is real, available for readers to buy. Or not. This is the culmination of a journey, and the very beginning.

When I return to the narrow lounge with its dim lighting, eclectic décor, and retro soundtrack, the party is in full swing. Theo approaches with a flute of champagne. "How're you holding up?" His hand is warm and intimate on the curve of my back. We've been seeing each other for almost two years, but sometimes it still feels new, a little awkward. Like now. There are people at this event who have never met my boyfriend, and I know they'll be surprised. Theo is nine years younger than I am, though it's not readily noticeable. At thirty-five, he's rugged, athletic, outdoorsy—a typical West Coast guy. He owns a company that

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rents Jet Skis and paddleboards in the summer, snowmobiles and skis in the winter. Theo and his staff of exuberant Gen Z'ers offer guided tours, too. He's an odd choice for a human house cat like me, but somehow, we work. Still, I know how we appear: mismatched, like a hiking boot and a fluffy slipper. My ex, Adrian, and I bickered and sniped constantly, but we looked the part.

"I'm nervous," I admit, and Theo pulls me close, kisses the side of my head.

"Drink up," he suggests, and I take a tiny sip. There's a fine line between taking the edge off and slurring.

My bestie, Martha, hurries up to me, her eyes shiny and unfocused. She has no reason to curtail her free champagne intake, and she clearly hasn't. "Okay, babe, let's do this." She squeezes my free hand. "I'll introduce you and then I'll call you up onstage for the toast."

"Thanks." I squeeze her hand back. Martha had insisted on playing emcee. She loves the spotlight, I know this about her, but she also loves me. When I told her that a publisher had offered six figures for my debut novel (just barely six figures but still!), she'd reacted with a pure, unadulterated joy that almost matched my own. "I knew you could do it!" She'd wrapped me in a hug so tight my ribs ached. There was no envy. No resentment. No doubt that I was worthy. The same could not be said for some others in my orbit.

Martha turns to Theo. "Have you got the book?"

"Got it." He presents a copy of my novel, a bookmark slipped into the first chapter.

"I'll call Camryn up for the toast," Martha continues. "After that, you take her glass and hand her the book for the reading."

"Thanks, you two." I smile at them each in turn, my eyes glistening, a thickness in my throat.

"Oh my god, stop," Martha chides. "You're so emotional."

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And I am. Because this is my dream realized. After years of rejection and false starts. After paying money I didn't have for workshops and courses. After being scammed by a fake agent; neglecting my daughter so I could write; doubting my talent, questioning my tenacity, and cursing my luck, I am a published writer. An author. It's a validation my soul has craved since I was a girl.

My best friend steps onto the small stage where a musician with a guitar plays cover tunes on the weekends. Theo and I sink into a darkened corner beside it. Martha moves to the mic, taps it. *Thunk, thunk*. "Thank you all for coming." The crowd quiets in response. "We're here tonight to celebrate the launch of my dear friend Camryn's first novel, *Burnt Orchid*."

Applause. A few exuberant hoots. I dab at a tear that threatens my smoky eye. Looking out at the crowd of well-wishers, my heart swells. All these people have come out for me. To show their support and toast my achievement. I'd reached deep into the friend archives for this event. Martha said we needed to fill the room. And I want people to buy my book, of course. There are over fifty people filling the sticky little bar I've rented for the occasion, and I appreciate every one of them.

Closest to the stage is a cluster of my colleagues: three high school counselors, a handful of teachers, some of the admin staff. They work hard for mediocre pay at a school in a rough neighborhood. It's Thursday night, and tomorrow they'll have to wrangle angry, troubled, recalcitrant teens. But they're imbibing freely, nibbling the circulating canapés, happy for an excuse to blow off steam. To celebrate a co-worker rising out of the trenches. Partway out, anyway. I'm still working three days a week. For now.

Behind my co-workers is a mishmash of friends and acquaintances. Martha's husband, Felix, nurses a beer, eyes bright as he watches his gregarious partner of eight years. I note the gaggle of stay-at-home moms from Liza's private school (Adrian's

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parents insist and pay the fees), their clingy outfits skimming their yoga-toned bodies. They had all but dropped me when Adrian and I divorced. No one wants a single woman at their dinner party. What if she drinks too much and flirts with the husbands? What if they flirt with her? But when they heard my publishing news, they came out of the woodwork, my exile forgotten.

My college roommate is here, now an orthopedic surgeon with three sons in high school. I spy my hairdresser and her pals; a cluster of neighbors; a crew from the gym I never have time to go to. My publisher has invited some local salespeople, and a woman in a wrap-dress who works for the distributor. A few high school friends whisper among themselves, accustomed to Martha's rambling speeches.

At the back of the room, huddled together in a tight little knot, is my writers' group. There are five of us: Rhea, Marni, Spencer, Navid, and me...although Rhea isn't here tonight. A head cold, she said, though I have my doubts. Up until now, Rhea had been the most accomplished in our circle, publishing a few short stories and winning a prestigious but obscure literary award. I know my success is hard for her, for all of them. Because it would be for me. I remember the envy, the visceral longing to be recognized. This is what they are all striving for, the end goal of their years of work. They're all smiling but I see the strain in it.

My phone vibrates in my tiny purse: a notification. It will be one of my loved ones who couldn't make it tonight: my mom or my sister on the other side of the country; or Liza, stuck at her dad's place because she's too young to attend a party at a bar. Maybe it's my agent or my editor, wishing me luck tonight. Martha is still talking, moving on to our meeting in the eighth grade, and I realize this introduction might be longer than my reading. I set my flute on a table and pull out my phone.

It's an email, sent to my author account. I'd been encouraged by

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my publisher to set up a website, to include a “contact me” form. It feels fortuitous to receive my first fan mail moments before I take the stage. Eagerly, I tap to open the message.

INGRID WANDRY

RE: Burnt Orchid

I just finished reading your book and I enjoyed it, for a piece of mindless garbage. But when I read your bio that says you are a high school counselor, I was disgusted. Your novel has a prominent teen storyline, and you’ve obviously exploited the psyches and crises of your vulnerable public school students to make a few bucks. Shame on you. I hope their parents sue you.

Humiliation burns my cheeks, makes me feel dizzy and sick. I wobble in my heels as though this woman has reached out and slapped me. Theo cups my elbow to steady me.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, but I can’t talk. My mouth is dry and sour. I wasn’t prepared for such hatred and vitriol. The ugliness of the words has rattled me, dredged up all my self-doubt and insecurities.

“Please raise your glass,” Martha says, glancing into the wings. It’s my cue. “To the success of *Burnt Orchid*. And our good friend Camryn Lane.”

Blindly, I stumble onto the stage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robyn Harding is the bestselling author of *The Drowning Woman*, *The Perfect Family*, *The Swap*, *The Arrangement*, *Her Pretty Face*, and *The Party*. She has also written and executive produced an independent film. She lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, with her family and two cute but deadly rescue chihuahuas.

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