

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE SWAN HOUSE

# THE PROMISED LAND

*A Novel*

ELIZABETH  
MUSSER

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*The Promised Land* is dedicated  
to three of my favorite females:

My beautiful daughter-in-law, Lacy Elizabeth Musser, you are the answer to every prayer I have prayed for my son since he was born. You are courageous and kind, hardworking and practical, godly and generous, as well as the best mother possible to my grandchildren.

Nadja'Lyn Alexandra Musser, my first granddaughter, you are the surprise that God delivered to our family in the most wonderful way. You bring joy, laughter, and love everywhere you go, Naj, and especially to your Mamie, who loves you so much.

Lena Sky Musser, my infant granddaughter, your birth in the middle of a pandemic and on the very day that my mother (your great-grandmother) graduated to heaven a few years earlier, gave us life after death, joy after grieving, spring after winter, hope in the midst of uncertainty. I already love you so much and can't wait to hold you in my arms.

## CHAPTER

# 1

### ABBIE

APRIL 5, 2018

I have spent twenty years carefully stitching my family's life together, so when it suddenly starts to unravel I find myself in a tangled knot of anxiety.

My son Bobby is wolfing down a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in our kitchen. He says, "Mom, I have something to tell you."

Bobby is a good kid, so I don't think I'm going to hear about drugs or a pregnant girlfriend. But I don't expect this.

"I'm thinking of doing a gap year."

"A what?"

"You know, taking a year off between high school and college."

"To do what?"

"To see the world. Stephen talks about how great his gap year was, and it's made me think about it."

Stephen Lefort is Bobby's boss at the newspaper, where he's doing an internship in graphic design.

I'm speechless. I've always been accused of being a perfectionist, and I don't deny it. But is it perfectionism to want my son to do the next logical thing: go to college? After we've paid for his private high school education and he's gotten stellar marks on his SATs and has already been accepted to three outstanding schools?

A sharp piece of fear lodges itself in the back of my throat. To be honest, I have sensed Bobby leaving us little by little. Over the past year or two, his great big, generous, creative heart has meandered from school and sports and girls to something more ethereal.

Bill hasn't been concerned. Bill is never concerned.

"I thought I'd backpack around Europe, you know, seeing all the museums, like Swanee did. I'd like to spend some time in Paris hanging out with her artist friend, Jean-Paul." He's blushing under his bushy bangs. "Stuff like that."

I try to swallow down my fear. "I don't think going to Paris right now is the best idea, with secret hubs of terrorists all over Europe."

"But wouldn't it rock for me to do Europe the way Swanee did?"

Swanee is my mother, and she met Jean-Paul as a teenager, when Paris was under siege during the spring of 1968. She is an artist, and her sketches from that time are filled with riot police, burned-out cars, and chaos.

"That was a very confusing and messy time, Bobby."

"I know. How cool is it that Swanee was part of it?" His warm brown eyes are lit up like the Eiffel Tower at night. "And I could visit all those amazing museums like Great-grandmom Sheila did on *her* trip to Europe. I'll make it a family tradition!"

The jagged fear slips down my throat and into my stomach. “Bobby! Your great-grandmother died in a plane crash because of that trip!”

He talks over my outburst. “And I *have* to go to Vienna. You know it’s always been my dream to see the paintings in the Kunsthistorisches Museum.”

No, I do not know this. Although my mother probably does. It’s the kind of thing he’d discuss with her.

“And I wouldn’t just be soaking up art, Mom. Stephen says I can do some reporting for the *Press*. He knows people outside of Vienna I can stay with, and I can even help out missionaries who work with refugees at a ministry center there.”

His beautiful, boyish face is alight with passion and enthusiasm. He’s the spitting image of a younger Bill, thick, unruly reddish-brown hair falling in his eyes, which are the softest brown, light, gentle. He’s tall like his father too, almost six foot one, and lanky, and the peach fuzz above his upper lip has recently turned to sandpaper scruff.

I look for a way to escape from the kitchen, but Bobby is standing in front of the only door. The words parade before me like howling ghosts: *riot police, insurrection, plane crash, refugees*. I paste a smile on my face and whisper, “Wow. It sounds like this is something you’ve been thinking about for a while.”

When I tell Bill about our conversation that evening, he shrugs. “We have to let him go, Abbs. Bobby’s an old soul. He won’t get into trouble. Now, if it were Jason wanting to hop on a plane, I’d be concerned. But he’ll have enough rules to break at boarding school to keep him busy. I fully expect him to be expelled before Christmas.”

I do not find that remark humorous. Both boys are leaving us at the same time. And neither in the way I’d planned for them to leave. I close my eyes and see sixteen-year-old

Jason, all blue-eyed, blond-haired charm, saying, “It’s got an awesome football team, Mom—you heard what the recruiter said. They need me.” He’d winked and grinned, knowing full well that the dimple in his right cheek would melt my alarmed heart.

“Bobby will be fine,” Bill says. “He’s been taking care of all of us for a long time.”

“Oh, Bill. That’s the problem. He wants to take care of everyone he meets. He’ll give all his money away to a homeless man or some struggling artist. He doesn’t know how to make a train reservation or find a hotel. He’s never had to—”

Bill holds up a hand to stop my diatribe. “That’s exactly why we need to let him go, Abbs. He’ll learn. Without us.”

---

Three months later we’re standing in the rotunda at the Atlanta History Center, all of the Middleton-Bartholomew clan, listening to Swanee.

“It was quite a feat to move this baby,” she says.

“This baby” is the *Cyclorama*, a circular painting that is longer than a football field, weighs six tons, and is as tall as a four-story building. When we were kids, our folks would take my sisters and me down to Grant Park to the zoo and then into the old brick building that housed the *Cyclorama* for a hundred years. We’d walk around the circular room and stare at the painting of the Battle of Atlanta as Mama narrated history. “Eighteen sixty-four was a turning point in the Civil War. . . . The painting was originally intended for Northern audiences. . . . See the face of Clark Gable on that soldier?”

I was both fascinated and repulsed by the painted gore of bloody soldiers and dead horses.

Now the huge historic painting has been painstakingly moved to its new home in Buckhead. Both Mama and Daddy

were consultants for this project—Mama because she is *the* Mary Swan Middleton, beloved native Atlanta artist, and Daddy because he’s been a part of Atlanta’s city planning for over four decades.

We’re all here for this behind-the-scenes preview: Mama and Daddy; Nan, Ellie, and I; and our husbands and our children. Mama moves with grace, her white hair catching the light, as she describes the effort that went into the move.

Bobby is watching his grandmother with rapt adoration. As a child, he loved to go to her house and sit and watch her paint. He’s followed her to a bunch of exhibits, carried her paintings, and helped her install them in homes around Buckhead. He breathes in the paint and turpentine and stories, and then he comes home to paint for himself.

Me, I can’t paint anything but the walls of my house.

My father, sitting in his wheelchair to my right, speaks to me, and I turn to him. “Mighty fine to be here with you, Abbie. I remember going with you and your mom and your sisters to see it way back when.”

It’s the exact same comment he has already made twice in the past twenty minutes. I feel that same slice of fear, almost dread. For all intents and purposes Daddy is legally blind, but he insisted on coming with us to see the *Cyclorama*, and there’s nothing Mama and my sisters and I wouldn’t do for him. We are desperately trying to keep him healthy and fight off every demon, every type of disease or depression that could grab at him. But of course, we’re failing.

Bill is standing on my other side, and I find his hand and hold it tight. Thank heavens he’s steady amid all the change. My eyes dart from Daddy to Bobby to Jason, and I say in my head, *I can’t lose all three of them at once, Lord. Not now. Not yet.*

We're lying in bed reading a week later, Bill and I, the gulf between us as wide as the Chattahoochee River that rushes through Atlanta, heading south. He closes his book. "I need a break, Abbie," he says.

"Yeah, I know," I concur. "It's been exhausting, but things'll slow down once we've moved into the loft."

"That's not what I mean."

A tingle runs down my spine. "What *do* you mean?"

"I've taken a consulting project in Chicago for three months."

Bill has always traveled a bit for work . . . but three months? Not a word comes out of my parched throat for several seconds, then I blurt, "But Bobby's leaving on Monday!"

Bill rolls over on his side so that he's facing me. "Yes, but it's not as though he's going to college and needs us to unpack his bags or fix up a dorm room. He's packing a backpack and flying to Europe! Jason leaves for boarding school on Tuesday. I'll be here to get the boys off and the house unpacked."

The expression in his eyes is cold, almost angry. "Why did you agree to this move if you aren't going to be around for three months?" I whisper.

He's lying on his back now, the gray in his hair picking up the light from his bedside lamp. He's wearing the ratty orange T-shirt that I've begged him to toss out for years. He finally conceded to making it part of his pajama wardrobe. The faded shirt has a rip in one sleeve where his tanned and toned shoulder shows through. He still smells like laughter and games, but his eyes are closed, and his mouth is turned down in a deep frown.

Finally he says, "I didn't agree, Abbie. You begged and begged and begged, and then you decided." His voice sounds hard, exasperated. And weary.

I'm trying to swallow, but all I get is a suffocating dryness.

We've lived in the Grant Park neighborhood of Atlanta for eighteen years. But this new place, a loft on Atlanta's trendy Beltline, well, it's airy with a view to take your breath away. And Daddy helped design it. Bill and I agreed it was a wise move. We agreed. . . .

"I just can't deal with your need to control everything anymore, Abbs. I just . . . need a break."

He rolls back over on his side, away from me, and I know that everything really is unraveling.

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The boxes are ready to be loaded into the moving van, and I'm sitting in our big old empty house, sprawled on the tile floor beside Poncie, our spaniel mutt, who begs me with her eyes to explain what has just happened. "We're moving, gal. I've told you that before."

She's slithered from room to room for weeks now, her golden eyes sad and confused, as if I am betraying her right in front of her little wet nose. How dare I pack up every last item in the house?

Billy Joel plays from my iPhone. I take a long gulp of water and stroke Poncie's soft, fluffy coat. Billy's crooning about his dream. He just wants to be alone in his home with the person he loves.

I get a catch in my throat, and suddenly I'm weeping. Poncie snuggles closer to me, head in my lap, and I stroke and weep, stroke and weep as Billy sings the tale of my life.

I feel his longing.

It's my longing too.

If only.

How can everything be going so wrong?

*I need a break, Abbie.*

Every box is labeled with a number, and it's all gridded onto

an Excel sheet so that the movers can lift the boxes out of the truck and take them to the exact room in the new place. I have it all planned perfectly, to the last detail.

Except . . .

*I need a break.*