

CARMEN SCHOBER

pretty

Little

pieces

A NOVEL



Books by Carmen Schober

After She Falls

Pretty Little Pieces

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CARMEN SCHOBER



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For Jeff, Vivian, Sofia, and Leo.

Our story is my favorite.

“There. Done.”

Georgina smiles in the mirror as Margot finishes styling the last strand. Her curly mane is tamed and glossy, and it frames her contoured face—also Margot’s handiwork.

Georgina gently swings her hair from side to side. “I love it.”

“You look perfect,” Margot says through a mouthful of pins. “Are you nervous?”

Georgina nods. The entire day has been a blur of preparation for tonight, and now her eyes are darting between the phone in her lap and her reflection in the mirror. Messages—mostly from her ecstatic mother and excited friends—are rolling in so fast she can’t keep track. “It doesn’t feel real yet, honestly,” she adds, wishing it did. She’s worked so hard for this moment.

Margot smiles and slides a pearl pin through Georgina’s hair. “It is real, babe. You’re doing it—”

Georgina stiffens in the chair as another message arrives.

“All good?”

Georgina prides her eyes away from her father’s text, but the damage is done. “Yes,” she lies. “Sorry.”

“You’re fine. I can’t even imagine your phone right now. I think you should go with the claret,” Margot suggests, shifting

the focus to lipstick, which Georgina appreciates. “But I also love this new peach.”

She finishes up a few minutes later and showers Georgina with air kisses, so Georgina turns on some music to fill the too-quiet apartment, but her thoughts wander back to her father’s text.

Congratulations. I’m proud of you.

Five simple words, but she sifts them in her mind, searching for hidden clues. His almost-constant silence makes every word seem irritatingly important. Her fingers hover over her phone for a moment, but then she sets it on the vanity.

“You can write back later,” she reminds herself, recalling the boundaries Alvin suggested she set with both of her parents. Georgina’s always felt like she has to respond immediately, especially when it comes to them.

“That’s the beauty of a boundary, Georgina,” Alvin had explained at her last session. *“It’s you choosing your own response instead of going into autopilot.”* His gray eyes were encouraging under his fluffy eyebrows. *“And boundaries are especially important when your parents don’t have any,”* he added with a sad smile.

Georgina takes Margot’s advice and reaches for the safer, muted claret. She twists the tube and glides the color over her lips but stops when her stomach tightens. She’s had light cramps on and off all afternoon, but she had plowed through them, too busy to pay much attention until now.

Worry fills her when they don’t fade. Each one hurts a little more than the one before it, so she shifts in her seat, hoping a new position might help, but the next one surges harder. She gasps and suddenly stands up, lurching toward the toilet as the lipstick slips from her fingers and clatters against the tile.

She lifts her sequined dress just in time as the pain deepens and blood rushes from her body. Panic fills her as she realizes what's happening.

She's losing the baby.

"Please let it be okay," she prays instinctively, even though it's obviously not okay. She covers her face with her hands and inhales through the pain. "Please, please, please let it be okay. . . ."

When she uncovers her face moments later, she finally looks down and quickly flushes the toilet. Her muscles eventually relax again, and the shock fades, but she can't make herself move. Her feelings are rising like a cold, dark tidal wave, and it gets worse when she catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

Thankfully, Lance isn't home yet. As awful as she feels right now, she doesn't want him to see her like this. *She* doesn't want to see herself like this, but the bathroom is filled with mirrors, so she can't hide. She fixes her eyes on a vase of dying lilies instead and whispers another desperate prayer.

"Help me."

"Hey, Joanna Gaines! Over here!"

Georgina turns in the direction of a familiar voice and finds Corrine Jacobs grinning back at her. She eyes Georgina's gown and cashmere sweater combination. "Aren't you looking rather iconic tonight?"

Georgina smiles. "Thanks." The sweater is a little warm for late April, but she's committed to the look. Corrine stands out, too, in her drapery dress and towering heels, even among so many beautiful people crammed inside the art gallery. She's been Lance's assistant for years, and Georgina's never seen her in flat shoes.

"Lance should be here any minute," Corrine says, glancing

at her phone and typing something at breakneck speed. “They reshot a bunch at the Gulch house,” she adds with a grimace. “He’s not a happy camper.”

Georgina nods but hides her disappointment from Corrine. She doesn’t want to talk about the miscarriage yet, but she wouldn’t mind his strong arms around her.

“How’s the cookbook going, by the way?” Corrine asks, her smoky eyes lighting up. “Did you decide on a theme?”

“Not yet.” Between the unexpected pregnancy and preparing for her new show with Lance, her potential cookbook contract is still sitting on the back burner. She’s always wanted to write one, but the timing couldn’t be worse.

“I think you should just do a spin on the whole country farmhouse thing and roll with your Joanna vibes. Apple pie, but make it fashion, you know? That sort of thing.”

Georgina smiles weakly. Corrine’s referring to the *Young Southern Style* cover that earned Georgina and Lance a spot at tonight’s event in the first place. Georgina’s mother ran out and bought fifteen copies.

Designers Lance Broussard and Georgina Havoc look more like the next Chip and Joanna Gaines every day as the power couple prepares to host a new design series flipping unique spaces across Nashville. Twenty-nine-year-old Havoc is rapidly following in Joanna’s footsteps with a beloved lifestyle blog and cookbook talks—

The magazine gushed on for another five paragraphs, but Georgina’s eyes kept coming back to those two sentences. The comparison is thrilling but daunting, and her people haven’t stopped talking about it since.

“Georgie!”

Poppy McCrae loops her arm with Georgina's and pulls her toward the food. Georgina throws Corrine an apologetic look, but relief fills her. Corrine is nice enough, but she's intimidating. It could be her cool confidence, or it could be because Lance's life would instantly combust without her.

"Okay, just tell it to me straight. Do I look like garbage?" Poppy glances down at her loose linen dress, which barely hides her baby bump, then back at Georgina with an uneasy expression as a woman in Marchesa glides by. Unlike Corrine, Poppy doesn't own a single pair of heels, so she's shorter than pretty much everyone in the room.

"You look adorable, like always."

Poppy looks skeptical, but Georgina means it. Poppy's red-gold hair is tied back in a quick mermaid braid and reveals her glowing freckled face.

Typically, Georgina would've touched her bump and updated her prediction—she's sure it's a boy now—but she doesn't tonight. Her emotions are too close to the surface.

"Is this, like, your poker face, Georgie? Because it's good. Almost too good." Poppy frowns. "Are you secretly geeking out on the inside?"

Georgina forces a bright smile under her probing eyes. "I'm happy, Pop." It's not a lie—she *is* happy—but she can't shake off the heaviness of the miscarriage. "I'm just overwhelmed, I think. . . ."

"Well, you're allowed to freak out since this is literally *the* moment," Poppy continues, her eyes glowing with pride. "Like, you did it, Georgina Havoc. You really freaking did it."

Nostalgia and sadness hit Georgina at the same time as Poppy hands her a glass of champagne. "No, *we* did it."

Poppy smiles. Neither of them could've ever guessed how much *Nail Breakers* would take off when they pitched the concept to UpScale three years ago. They were just artsy Instagrammers

back then with a knack for flipping furniture and staging fabulous spaces, and somehow their side hustle turned into two seasons of a wildly popular show.

Sadness tugs at Georgina as she sips the champagne. Almost six months have passed since Poppy left *Nail Breakers* to raise her daughter, Olivia, but Georgina misses her every single day. She's also a little envious. Georgina could never give up her career like that, but she thought she'd at least be married by now.

"Here comes Lance," Poppy mutters.

Georgina's mood lifts as she turns and catches his eye.

"Sorry I'm late, babe," he says, pulling her in for a quick kiss on the cheek. "Gulch," he adds glumly, finishing what's left of Georgina's champagne. "I should just burn it down at this point. Oh, hey, Pop," he adds, suddenly noticing her. "How's it going?"

Poppy returns the greeting with a tight smile. Technically, Georgina is the only one who is allowed to call her that, but Poppy lets it slide. "Hello, Lancey."

He frowns at the nickname, but his eyes drift back to the crowd. It's a mix of familiar faces and strangers in a shimmering sea of stylists, designers, and photographers, and his presence causes a fresh murmur of excitement. He looks back at Georgina with a smirk. "Are you ready for this, G?"

No. *Just hold me for a second, please.* That's what she wants to say, but "I think so" is all that comes out.

"Do we both go up there, or just you?" he asks, eyeing the press area.

"Um, I think just me first, maybe . . ." Georgina tries to remember the long list of instructions from the *Young Southern Style* intern, but her mind keeps slipping back to the bathroom—the silence, the blood, the lilies—and she just wants to be alone with him for a few minutes as her feelings rise and fall all over again. Tonight was the night she was going to tell him about the baby. "Hey, can we go—"

“They’ll want pictures of both of us,” he says, running a hand through his swishy Clark Kent hair—a trait that earned him the nickname “Superman” from his fawning fans. Georgina can’t blame them. Her formerly awkward teenage self would’ve probably passed out at the sight of him.

“Sorry,” he adds, finally perfecting the swoop. “What were you saying?”

“Um . . .” She tries again, but the words still won’t come out. Poppy throws her a curious look. “Nothing important.”

“One second. I’ll be right back.”

Her disappointment returns as he slips off again with his phone pressed against his ear, but she doesn’t have time to think about it, thanks to Poppy, who drags her over to the press area without him. It’s a velvety blue carpet with a million logos where they’re supposed to do standard hand-on-hip poses for a gaggle of flashing cameras, but Poppy ruins every shot by talking or laughing.

“Okay, okay, one serious one,” she says, finally standing still with her arm around Georgina. Georgina smiles happily as the lights burst all over again. It’s the best moment of the night so far, but it’s bittersweet, too. She’s excited for the next chapter with Lance, but *Nail Breakers* was a wild, fabulous ride.

“My turn,” Lance says, surprising her as he steps up to take Poppy’s place.

Poppy smiles stiffly and steps back, and Georgina’s stomach flutters as every pair of eyes moves in their direction.

“Y’all are just too precious,” Corrine purrs from a few feet away, snapping pictures on her phone as Lance pulls Georgina closer.

Georgina does her best to match his confidence as the press pelts them with comments and questions, but he’s better at this sort of thing than she is.

“Lance! Georgina! You both look incredible tonight!” A

stunning woman with a microphone waves them down. “Some UpScale fans have commented that you two have such different styles. Do you think that’s going to be a challenge for *Trending in Tennessee*?”

There’s a collective swoon as Lance smiles charmingly at the crowd. “I don’t think so.” He glances back at Georgina with hopeful eyes. “We’re better together, right, G?”

It sounds like a champagne bottle popping or lipstick clattering—Georgina’s not sure which—but whatever it is jolts her awake. It takes her a full minute to realize she was dreaming before she rolls over and presses a hand against her gurgling stomach. She drank more than she should’ve last night and fell asleep as soon as Lance helped her unzip her dress.

The sadness seeps in again. She’d had a cute scavenger hunt planned to announce the pregnancy, starting with clues in the entryway and ending with a new super-sleek rocking chair in their guest bedroom. Thankfully, she remembered to pick up the notes and drop them in the trash before the party last night.

She reaches for her phone when it chirps, thankful for a distraction.

CAN YOU SAY POWER COUPLE??

Georgina clicks on the link from Annette, her publicist, and squints as images of her and Lance fill the screen. It’s a promotional video for *Trending in Tennessee*. Maren Morris’s song “Bones” blares in the background as Lance climbs ladders and swings hammers, followed by Georgina fluffing pillows and staging shelves. The solo moments culminate with them slow dancing together in a half-finished room. She frowns. Under normal circumstances she would love it, but seeing everything

so perfectly edited feels wrong as her mind drifts back to the blood in the bathroom.

She shoves the thoughts away and slips on a robe, then pads toward the kitchen. Lance is already there, seated in the breakfast nook and slumped over his laptop. They're both early risers, even when they're out late.

"Hey," he says, glancing up when he sees her.

"Morning," she mumbles.

"Too much champagne?"

She smiles weakly as she measures out coffee beans. "Apparently."

His fingers click against the keyboard. "There was a lot to celebrate."

"Did you have fun?" she asks, raising her voice over the coffee grinder.

"Yeah," he mumbles when she finishes.

Her mood lifts a little when their eyes meet. He's even more handsome in the mornings, when his face is still relaxed. By the end of most days, his entire body is tense—one of the side effects of being on camera all the time.

"How was my speech?" she asks, hoping it wasn't terrible. She can barely even remember it now, thanks to too many mixed emotions combined with alcohol.

"It was fine. You sounded nervous, but you got through it."

Her eyes widen. "It was bad?"

He yawns. "I said it was fine, babe." A ray of sunlight slices across his bare, muscled chest as his eyes narrow at something on the screen.

Insecurity fills her as she finishes the coffee. "I guess I was pretty nervous. Being compared to Joanna Gaines freaks me out a little," she admits, joining him in the nook. Georgina has loved her for as long as she can remember, but those are some pretty fabulous shoes to fill.

“Yeah, I get it.” Lance sips as he scrolls. “And, like, is it even that great of a compliment?”

Her mouth falls open. “What? How is that not a compliment—”

“Calm down, G. I know it’s a compliment.” He smirks at the offended look on her face. “I’m just saying the Gaineses are kind of boring. That’s all. All perfect and neutral and blah.” He shrugs. “I’ll go with it, obviously, but I don’t really want to be a middle-aged dude with a million kids who only uses shiplap and white paint.”

Her brows raise at the sudden condescension in his voice, but she wonders if it’s just a little jealousy. UpScale is a big network, and Lance’s show is popular, but he’s not in the same stratosphere of fame as the Gaineses. Georgina isn’t, either—which is why the comparison is so exciting.

“I don’t think they’re boring,” she says, keeping her voice light. “They both seem nice and down to earth, and Joanna—”

“I know, I know. She decorates houses and writes recipes and pops out kids,” he mutters, covering another yawn. “I just don’t get why people love them so much. They don’t take any risks. UpScale doesn’t either.”

Georgina’s annoyance rises sharply, but she hides it behind her coffee cup. He keeps bringing up the Gaines’s children like they’re the worst thing in the world, and she doesn’t understand why. They seem cute and well-adjusted, especially considering how famous their parents are.

“Don’t get all sensitive about it, babe.” His voice softens when he catches the disappointed look on her face. “I know it’s a big deal for you—for us. I’m just . . .” He sighs as his eyes drift to the screen again. “Busy.”

She nods, but her annoyance lingers. She knows he’s busy, but he doesn’t seem to notice that she has a lot on her mind, too.

“Are you hungry?” she asks, deciding not to push the subject. “I can make breakfast—”

“I need to head out soon, unfortunately.” He sighs. “No days off until Gulch is done.”

“Oh.” A desperate, sinking feeling hits her as he downs his coffee and snaps his laptop shut.

“I had a miscarriage,” she says softly when he starts to rise. “*What?*”

Her declaration startles them both.

“I . . . had a miscarriage,” she repeats as he falls back into his chair. She didn’t want to say anything until the moment was right, but the words slipped out before she could stop them. “Yesterday.”

“You were pregnant?”

Regret fills her as she nods. “I was only a few weeks along,” she explains as confusion shadows his face. Her bizarre appetite and aching fatigue are what prompted her to call her doctor, and he’s the one who suggested a blood test. She’ll never forget sitting in that office, her heeled feet dangling over the edge of the examination table as she listened to the stunning results.

“How, though?” Lance demands. Confusion shadows his face. “I thought you were on birth control.”

“I am,” she says, turning defensive. She never forgets to take it, but last month was an exhausting whirlwind of events, so she must’ve slipped up. “I was going to tell you last night,” she adds, setting her cup down, afraid it might slip from her shaking fingers. “After the party.”

His face softens, but his shoulders are still stiff. “So . . . are you, like, okay? Do I need to take you to the hospital or something?”

“No. I’m fine—”

“Are you sure?”

She nods, and thankfully—finally—he pulls her close. She’s not typically such a touchy person, but her emotions feel like waves, and she wants an anchor. She feels steadier until he frowns down at her.

“The timing wasn’t good, was it?”

She blinks at the question. It hurts, but the relief in his eyes hurts even more. “Would you have been happy?” she asks, suddenly wondering. She had assumed he would be, after the shock wore off, but maybe she was wrong? She waits as he fumbles for an answer.

“We’d have to figure out a lot of stuff. . . .”

His words land with a thud in her heart.

He curses softly. “I’m sorry, G, I know it’s terrible timing with this, too, but I really have to go.” His eyes turn apologetic as he rises. “We’ll talk tonight.”

Georgina sings along with a moody Adele song, her voice competing with the soft crackle of bacon grease. Maybe Lance didn’t want breakfast, but she does. Specifically, she wants ricotta pancakes, eggs with cream cheese and chives, and an unladylike pile of smoked sausage, but a sad little package of turkey bacon had been the only thing in her neglected fridge, so she settled for that.

She catches a glimpse of her reflection against the gleaming glass of the microwave and frowns. Her mounting stress is written across her face, and Lance’s abrupt exit didn’t help.

“I am loved. I am at ease. My feelings are valid,” she mutters, channeling her inner Alvin to stave off some anxiety, but it doesn’t work. She digs out her laptop instead. Her mother is the one who taught her that work is the best way to chase away empty feelings, and Georgina has used that strategy for as long as she can remember.

She relaxes slightly as she moves from one image to the next on Pinterest, starting with a collage of summer color palettes, but her uneasiness returns when she eventually ends up on her “I Do” board. She scowls at all the happy couples. She and Lance agreed that they should get engaged and buy a house in the next year, but he hasn’t given her any clues about when he might finally propose other than “when things settle down.”

She finally glances at her phone again, her anxiety growing. She *needs* to talk to him, even if it’s just for a minute. His eyes seemed so far away when he said good-bye.

Do you want to go out tonight? Or should I cook?

She distracts herself with a few emails while she waits for a reply, but an hour drags by, so she texts him again.

How’s filming going?

She cleans the entire apartment next, glancing at her phone between every other scrub. Lance pays someone to clean and prep their meals each week, which is nice, but those are her favorite forms of stress relief, and she misses them. Once that’s done, she forces herself to take a nap but wakes up forty minutes later and immediately starts digging through the sheets, searching for her phone. Desperation rising, she sends one more text.

Call me, please.

Her phone finally pings.

Still filming. He’ll have a break in twenty minutes—C

Georgina's mood dips further when she realizes it's from Corrine. When Lance finally does call, forty-five minutes later, his voice is sharp.

"What's going on, Georgina? Is something wrong?"

She winces. He only uses her full name when he's annoyed. "Nothing's wrong. I just . . . missed you."

"I told you I was filming."

Embarrassment fills her. *Say you missed me, too*, she pleads silently, but he doesn't. "I know," she murmurs. "I just thought you'd have a break sooner. Sorry."

"It's fine. . . ." He tries but fails to hide his annoyance. "So, you're okay?"

Georgina's breath catches in her throat. The truth is, she isn't okay, but she doesn't know why. She was barely pregnant, right? Why does it matter so much? "Yes, I'm fine," she repeats, trying to ignore the fact that Lance's reaction hurt as much as the actual miscarriage. "I—" She falls silent when Savannah's number flashes across the top of her screen, surprising her. They haven't talked since their last fight.

"G?" Lance's voice turns impatient again.

"Sorry," she says quickly, declining Savannah's call. "Do you want to go out to dinner tonight?" She waits as another voice fills the background on Lance's end, followed by some commotion. "I kind of feel like just getting take-out," she continues, "but whatever you want—"

"I'll call you back."

"Okay—"

She sighs as he hangs up and pulls the blanket up to her chin. Of course he's annoyed with her—he *said* he would be filming all day.

She drags herself out of bed to find the little bottle of Ad-derall tucked behind his arsenal of hair products, refusing to wallow, but she gets an uneasy feeling when she twists open

the lid. For one thing, she's not entirely sure how Lance gets them without a prescription, and for another, it would be *terrible* for her image if people ever found out. She can already imagine the comments.

"Looks like Georgina Havoc isn't so perfect after all!"

"I knew she was totally fake."

"So that's how she does it all—"

Georgina shoves the imaginary voices out of her mind and washes the tiny orange pill down with water. She uses them sparingly, anyway—usually just to get through stressful travel arrangements or exhausting days—and she has enough real worries without inventing more.

Everything is going to be fine, she tells herself when she slips out the front door twenty minutes later. She hates running, but it's better than waiting around for Lance like a desperate little Pomeranian. Her mother used to do that sometimes, first with her father, then with the boyfriends that followed, and Georgina swore she'd never do the same.

The pop music blasting in her ears repeats the same positive mantras as she runs—*get it, girl; be happy; life is good*—but the pit in her stomach deepens with every mile. When she returns to the apartment an hour later, her phone finally chirps.

I need some space tonight.

Anxiety spills over her like ice water as she reads the words again. She tries calling him, but he doesn't answer. Her fingers shake as she types back.

What do you mean?

When he doesn't reply, a tidal wave of panic rises in her chest.

I just had a miscarriage, Lance. I thought we were going to talk about it?

She calls again, but he ignores that, too, so she grabs her keys. She's Georgina Havoc. He's Lance Broussard. This is a misunderstanding. They can fix this. They *have* to fix it. She texts him again.

Please pick up your phone.

She drives to his condo, but the windows are dark. She frowns as a security camera swivels in her direction. She's never loved the fact that Lance didn't sell his bachelor pad after he moved into her apartment, but it is closer to the UpScale studio, and it's his style personified, with tall tan walls, angled furniture, and bold modern art, so she learned to live with it. She drives by the Gulch project next, but his Audi is nowhere in sight. Tears spring into her eyes.

It crosses her mind that she should probably go home and get a grip, but her mind begs her to go anywhere except the empty apartment, so she drives in the darkness, leaving the city and suburbs behind. At some point, her Lexus reminds her that the gas tank is running low, so she snaps out of her trance and parks on the side of a wooded gravel road. She almost gets out, but she and Savannah have watched too many crime dramas. She locks the doors instead and tries to calm down.

Her first panic attack happened when she was ten, at her first tennis match. Her mother had been screaming at her from the stands, trying to remind her of everything she had learned at her expensive lessons while her father watched helplessly, but Georgina still couldn't manage to serve the ball a single time, thanks to her dizzying nerves. Someone eventually led her away, and she sat down on the cool grass while everyone stared. After that disastrous match, Savannah practiced with her for so long that Georgina never missed another serve again.

She exhales. She needs to call Savannah back and make

amends, but her mind is too busy replaying every recent moment with Lance. She wishes she had never said anything about the baby.

“Please don’t let me lose Lance, too,” she mutters, shooting up another desperate prayer.

She jumps when her phone chirps.

We just need to hit pause, Georgina.

The knot in her stomach tightens. Her fingers fly over the keys.

We don’t have to talk about the baby, Lance.
We can just go back to normal. I know it
wasn’t part of the plan. I just needed to tell
someone.

They’ve always had that in common—a love for plans, control, order—so maybe that’s the issue. Is he just reeling from the shock? She waits, her hope rising as he types back, but his next message is the same.

I just need time to process this.

She stares at the words and sighs in frustration. Does this “pause” really have to be right now? When she already feels so alone?

We can’t process it together?

When he doesn’t answer, her sorrow turns to anger.

Lance’s sudden silence reminds her of her quick-to-flee father, and he has to realize that, since he’s one of the only people in the world who knows about her conflict-filled childhood. *Why is this happening?* she wonders silently. Is God abandoning

her, too? How could everything fall apart so fast? More anger fills her until guilt pulls at her heart.

Did God really abandon her, or did she abandon Him first?

As Georgina stares up at the deep darkness, tears touch her eyes. She never paid much attention to church growing up since their attendance was too sporadic to make sense of all the weird songs and sermons, but she's always believed in God, and she used to pray when she was younger. Shame fills her as she realizes God gave her everything she wanted and more, and she still let distractions and doubts creep in along the way.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, meaning it.