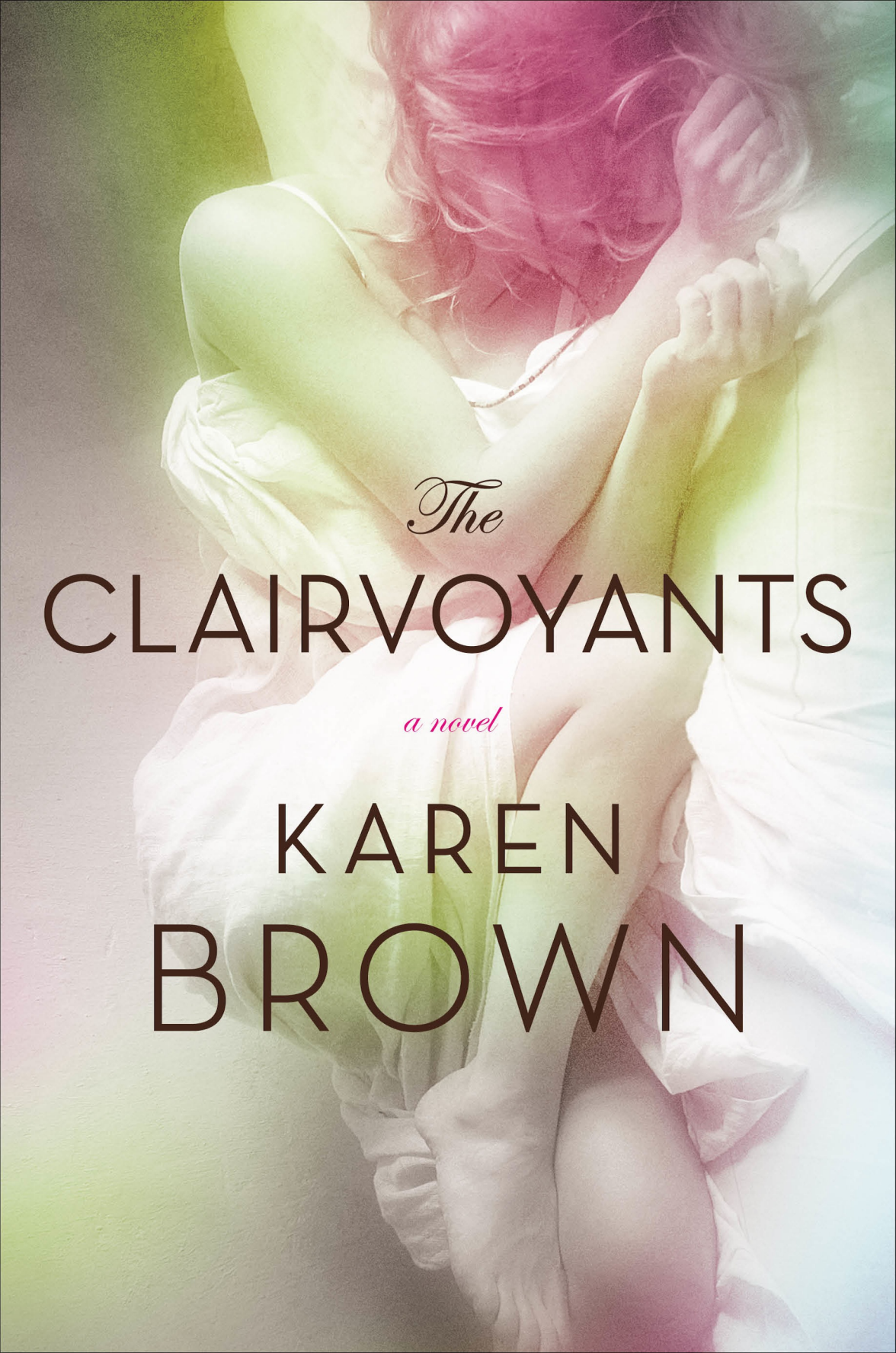
The
CLAIRVOYANTS
a novel
KAREN
BROWN

ALSO BY KAREN BROWN

The Longings of Wayward Girls

Pins and Needles

Little Sinners

THE CLAIRVOYANTS

The

CLAIRVOYANTS

a novel

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And he will find them divisible into two great classes—those whom we call the living, and those others, most of them infinitely more alive, whom we so foolishly misname the dead.

—C. W. Leadbeater, *Clairvoyance*, 1899

THE CLAIRVOYANTS

She is young—dark hair, blue eyes, lashes long and dark, spangled with frost. Her skin the only brightness in the small, dim space. She lies on a narrow bed. Above it are shelves of aluminum pots and pans—their finish worn away from years of use. Dollar Store pots. The kind we played with in the sandbox at the awful nursery school when we were small. Some of them dented. Alongside those, a box of matches, and a lantern smelling of kerosene, a tin of deviled ham, a rusted can of green beans, a moth-eaten bag of clothespins. Amber-colored light seeps through a curtained window into a galley-like space—a small counter, a stove, a tiny booth like a restaurant, and a rod hung across one end that holds tattered clothing slipping from metal hangers. Beyond the curtains, a snow-covered vista, the sun very low behind shaggy pines. Ferns of ice etch the inside of the window. The girl must be very cold without any clothes. Her limbs lie fixed—one arm across her breasts, the other thrown out like an actress about to take a bow. Somewhere, girls her age awaken in giddy expectation of Valentine's Day roses and heart pendants and dinners out with their boyfriends at places with white tablecloths. She stares at a point beyond the ceiling. Come here, *she says.*

1

I was named after my great-aunt, a nun I first saw in my grandfather's barn on my seventh birthday. The barn was in Connecticut, where I'd grown up, and Auntie Sister sat in her black habit on a bale of hay in a shaft of sunlight. Pieces of her dark hair snuck out of her wimple. I knew her from the photograph my grandmother kept in her living room—Sister's pretty face framed by her coif, her head tilted to one side, her eyes laughing. My grandmother had two older sisters, Martha Mary, destined for the convent, and Rose, who would languish in the old Fairfield State Hospital in Newtown.

For my birthday, I'd spent the night with my grandparents, their house placed at the edge of my grandfather's thirty acres—land bordered by the Mile Creek Club golf course, Long Island Sound, and the woods where the Spiritualists by the Sea had their camp—a handful of seasonal cottages and a temple. That evening, as I sat with my grandparents on the back terrace, my grandfather had cocked his head at the drifting notes of their organ.

"That's the sound you hear on the astral plane," he'd said.

The smoke from my grandfather's cigarette rose over the privet hedges and swirled off toward the water. "I hear it," I'd said, though the sound had faded. My grandmother pushed back her chair, the metal feet scraping against the slate. She took me by the hand and told me it was time for bed.

My overnight visit was a rare treat away from my three sisters. I didn't know why I'd been singled out this way—none of my sisters ever were. Unaccustomed to the quiet—the absence of arguing, of Leanne's music, and of Sarah banging through drawers, slamming her closet doors, complaining about not having anything to wear—I'd spent a fitful night on the high guest bed, which had a horse-hair mattress, an acorn bedpost, a history of bodies stretched out in sleep, or sex, or death. And in the morning I awoke before my grandparents. The house was cold, and the light at the bedroom window was like rose-tinged water. I did what I often did at home when I awoke before anyone else—I crept into rooms in the house and rummaged through drawers and cabinets—and I discovered in the bottom drawer of my grandmother's breakfront a child's white, leather-covered missal. It had gilt-edged pages, a silk ribbon bookmark, and colored illustrations—Jesus in all of them, a golden half-moon floating over his head. On the flyleaf Sister had penciled our name in cursive. I'd slipped the missal into my little overnight suitcase. I didn't think to ask my grandmother if I could have it. Once I'd asked for a ruby brooch I'd found in her jewelry box, and she'd told me no.

I'd never gone into the barn by myself before, but that morning my grandparents sent me off to play and, not used to playing alone, I had wandered along the pebbled drive, missing my little sister, Del. We were only a year apart and did everything together. Del was my mother's favorite—blond and pretty—and perceptive enough to try to include me when she saw she was getting more attention. If my mother noted how many flowers Del had picked, Del would pipe up: "But Martha chose the prettier ones!" Sometimes I was grateful for her

allegiance; other times I resented it and found her disingenuous. Still, my mother thought Del was smarter, and it served me to let her think it.

That dull morning I walked the hedges' perimeter, hoping to hear the Spiritualists' organ so that I might report back to my grandfather. I'd gathered a handful of the white pebbles from the drive, and I was dropping them in the grass, leaving a trail Del would have pretended to follow, falling into the game. "Oh, look at this path of pebbles? Where will it lead?"

But Del was at home, coloring in our book, taking the pages I'd saved for myself. We lived at that time in a ranch house our father had bought for our mother, in a new suburb ten miles away, one we would vacate a year later when they divorced and our mother moved us into our grandparents' house for good. I reached the barn and passed through the wide, open doorway. The eaves ascended high above me, and barn swallows darted in and out of the shadow and sunlight, sounding their little *cheeps* and *churees* of alarm. Somewhere inside the vast barn were the animals my grandfather kept—sheep, goats, a cow, and a horse. I sensed their shuffling and smelled the feed and the dense, almost cloying scent of manure. I saw Sister, and I waited nearby for her to notice me. I thought she might be praying.

The interior of the barn was cool and peaceful, as I knew all churches to be. My mother took us regularly to Mass at the old Sacred Heart, where the pews smelled of polished pine, and the statuary of Joseph and Mary gazed smooth-faced and pitying. We dipped the tips of our fingers in holy water. The priest came swinging the censer. The little bells ushered in a deep, encompassing silence.

In the barn, I held my breath, waiting.

Sister's bale of hay topped a small stack near my grandfather's workbench, his mill, the coiled copper wire, and the copper lightning rods stacked in worn, oily boxes. The chill of the damp stone floor rose through the soles of my sneakers. At no time did Sister speak to me or offer any message about what was to come. I wish to this day

that she had. She kept her head bowed, her eyes on her hands folded in her lap. Had she discovered my theft? Was she there to confront me and demand the missal back? Her veil fluttered, and she raised her head. Fearing her accusation, I fled outside, down the white pebbled drive to where my grandparents sat in woven wire patio chairs. Behind them the house's long porch trim was lacey cutouts, and to their left, beyond the privet hedge, the inground pool shimmered in the morning sunlight. I slid my hand into my grandmother's, and she held it in her lap's gabardine folds and patted it while they talked and had their coffee, the spiral of the steam shrouding their faces as they raised their cups.

Later, my family arrived—Leanne and Sarah, Del and my parents. Leanne and Sarah were jealous that I'd spent the night, and they refused to speak to me. Del put her hand in mine; she'd missed me, as I'd missed her. There was a cake and the seven candles I wished on and blew out. I waited in apprehension for Sister to emerge from the barn and join us, but she did not. I would eventually learn that in 1962, driving back to the convent upstate with three other sisters after a convention of the American Benedictine Academy, Sister had been in an accident. A blowing veil, perhaps, had obscured the driver's vision, and they'd all died on the New York State Thruway, many years before I saw her sitting in the sunlight in my grandfather's barn. This explained her smooth, youthful face when my grandmother's was creped and sagging, the outdated serge habit. It did not explain how I saw her, but I never questioned what most people might. A door had opened and I had left it open and maybe because of that, things happened the way they did. That was all I knew, and as a child all I cared to know.