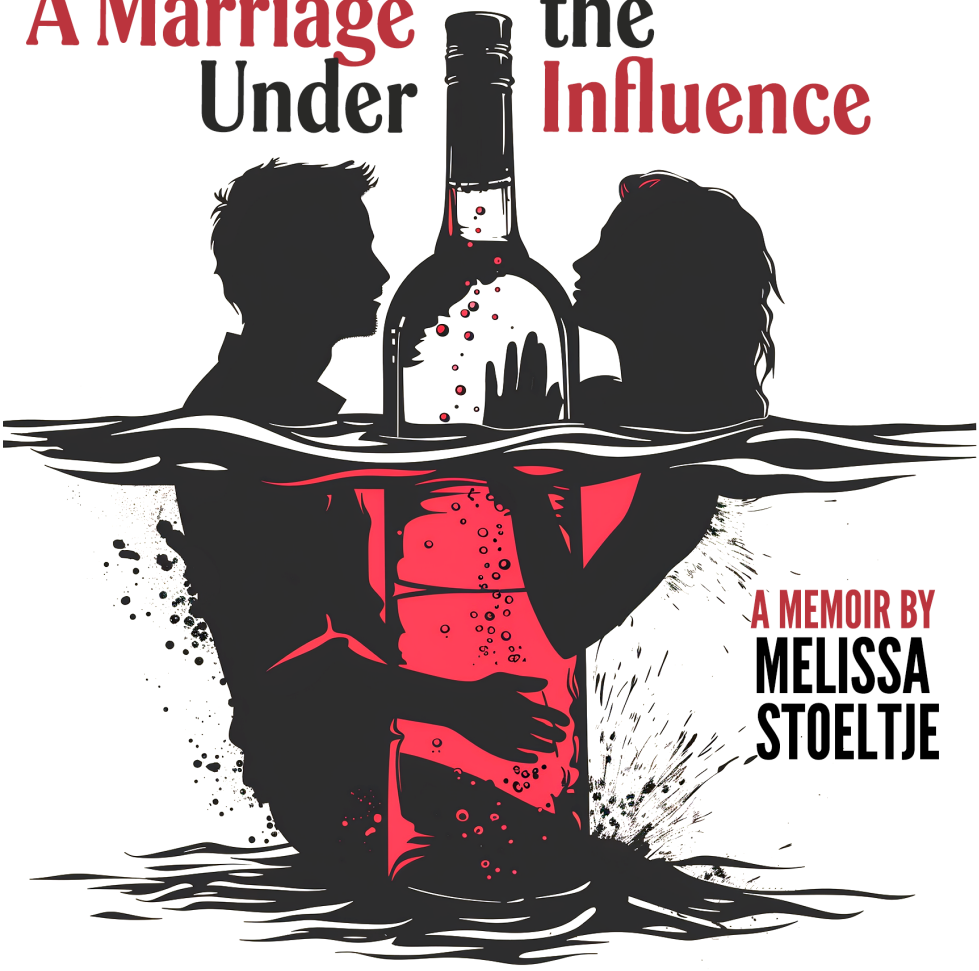
DRUNK LOVE

A Marriage Under the Influence



A MEMOIR BY

MELISSA STOELTJE

This book is a memoir and thus a work of memory. Specific conversations and other details have been recalled or reimagined to the best of my ability; any mistakes or misrememberings are solely mine. Names and identifying characteristics of certain individuals have been changed to protect their privacy and preserve their anonymity.

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Prologue

The shade lifts from my eyes the moment our car turns onto West Summit Avenue. What had been utter blankness suddenly transformed into a dim gray soup of our neighbors' houses flowing past my window. Newly roused, I try to speak. The trouble is, my tongue won't work. The half-dozen cocktails I've downed over the course of the evening still have a wrestler's grip on my brain's verbal center. My words come out in one long, ridiculous schmear.

My husband, my steadfast drinking buddy, a gentle bear of a man who loves me more than anyone, has finally reached his breaking point.

"Shut up," Mark mutters. "Just shut the fuck up."

The night began with drinks at a dimly lit bar a few blocks away from the Majestic Theater, where we had tickets to see *Jersey Boys*. Mark and I each downed a jumbo martini. He wanted to order a second, but I said no because we were meeting friends for dinner before the show, and I needed to stay on the right side of the slur zone. The last time Mary saw me, I was very drunk. My plan for the evening was to prove to her that I'm not a hopeless lush. To prove it to myself, too.

This goal—to get drunk but not too drunk—has become an increasingly tricky *pas de deux* over the past five years, a development that has stumped both Mark and me. For most of my thirty-plus-year drinking career, I managed my buzz effortlessly, a feat finessed with nary a thought. Nowadays, I'm prone to overshooting the mark, even on nights when my secret vow is to stay within the bounds of respectable inebriation.

Mark and I walk several blocks to the restaurant, where the streets of downtown San Antonio are crowded with curio shops and Hawaiian-shirted tourists. When we get there, Mary and her twenty-something son have already been seated, along with another couple we've never met. We order dinner, and the waiter asks me more than once if I want a wine refill. After three (or four), I lose count.

From there, the night becomes a series of bright camera flashes in a sea of darkness. On the walk to the theater, I'm ticked off because the husband of the couple asked if I was retired, perhaps due to my newly undyed silver hair.

"What the fuck!" I exclaim to Mary's son as we enter the theater. "I mean, look at me!" I gesture to my body. At fifty-two, I'm trim, with a spunky pixie haircut and wire-frame glasses.

"You look good," he says casually, before hurrying to catch up with his mother.

"You're being too loud," Mark whispers in my ear.

Before the lights go down, at my insistence, Mark eases a plastic flute of champagne into my hand. This is when the tape player in my head stops recording. There's a brief flash: I'm waiting in line for the restroom. Mark asks if I want something else to drink.

White wine and a glass of water. Again, darkness. Then, a flash of light at the end of the show: a standing ovation. I hear Mark mutter his standard sarcastic refrain, taken from a *Seinfeld* episode.

"So, we're doing *this* now," he sighs, lifting his big, hulking frame and reluctantly clapping. All the show's singing, dancing, and dialogue—my brain laid down not a whit of it.

This loss of time at the theater represents my first true blackout. Oh, I'd had a few brownouts before: dinner party chatter gone missing, fugitive chunks of movies I'd seen but couldn't recall, but these lapses were easy to explain away. I was just tired—simple as that. A real blackout served as my Maginot Line, the true indicator that my drinking was out of control and that I needed to stop.

At least that's what I told myself.

When we get home from the theater, I lurch into the house, strip off my clothes, and pee. I have the presence of mind to swallow two Advil, as well as the new antidepressant I'm taking for my chronic insomnia, a medication that will figure a month or so down the road in my last few furious dance steps with denial. Mark climbs into bed and turns away from me. Even his back looks angry. Before I slide into sleep, I hear him murmur, "We're going to have to do something about this."

It turns out my husband's plan to "do something" about my drinking wasn't just another of his idle threats, full of sound and fury but fleeting as a summer thunderstorm. What happened the next day would turn my life upside down, a life that, by this point, was a study in paradox and functional duplicity. To the outside world, I'm a successful journalist, a wonderful wife, and a doting mother to an only child. By all public metrics, I'm a loving sister, caring daughter, and law-abiding citizen. But inside our home, my disease is deepening, boiling into a fermenting rot, splashing misery on the two people I love the most: my husband and son.

There are doubtless many women like me—women who drown their tensions, strains, and insecurities every night with goblets of wine (these memes didn't come out of nowhere), then drag their tired bodies and minds to work each

day, keeping up appearances and responsibilities. We may not rack up the classic markers of problem drinking—lost jobs, DUIs, titanic blackouts, morning jitters, jail stints—but we're suffering all the same.

And we cause suffering, too. For women like me, the collateral damage of our addiction is the spouses and children we claim to adore—often the only people who see our disease. We are so good at keeping it hidden.

We get away with it because we can.

Fifteen years later, that's only part of the story I'm telling.

In my case, the "getting away with it" ended abruptly the day after my drunken night at the Majestic. Mark made a decision that triggered a true turning point—not just in my drinking career, but in my marriage. You know the old adage, "be careful what you wish for; you just might get it"? Mark wanted a sober wife, and he would get one. What we didn't know was that my putting down the wine glass would unleash a myriad of pathologies that had long bubbled just beneath the surface of our relationship. Sick dynamics that the booze served to tamp down.

There's a reason why most marriages wherein the alcoholic gets sober end up in divorce anyway.

That's another part of the story I'm telling. It's a long, winding journey that can be summed up in a few simple words: Alcohol brought us together. Would my sobriety tear us apart?

But in the decades before I met my husband (and favorite drinking buddy), there were signs—red flares shot into a darkening sky—that suggested drinking might not be a great fit for me. Subtle and sly at first, they became increasingly obvious as the years wore on.

By the end, it was clear that I was a woman in trouble. And my marriage hung in the balance.

PART ONE

WHAT WE WERE LIKE THEN

Chapter One

It's Christmas—or maybe Thanksgiving. Our house is full of relatives—except for my father, who left some years earlier when I was just six. An artist with movie-star looks and a violent temper, he never liked it when my mother's family came around. My memories of him are dim, blurry recollections of Sunday morning trips to the ice house to buy candy, staged to sabotage my mother's plans for church. One memory is crystal clear: the morning my father punched my mother in the face at the breakfast table. She fell to the floor, weeping and clutching her cheek, as my older sister and I cried into our Cocoa Puffs. When my father was in a full rage, my mother would take us into the bathroom, lock the door, and put us in the tub with her while he pounded on the door and screamed obscenities. I don't recall these episodes, but my older sister does. I wouldn't see my father again until my twenties, when the blank space he left behind would be filled with something temporary and unsavory. Even when Jack did live with us, he wasn't around much, spending most of his time at his studio or a bar called the Ebb Tide down the street, where he nurtured his nascent alcoholism, the warped genes he passed down to me, his middle daughter.

Father gone, we still live in the home my parents built, a Frank Lloyd Wright-style house full of modular 60s furniture and paintings on every wall. Two large A-frame windows flank the living room. Birds sometimes fly into them, and my sisters and I find their stiff bodies lying in the grass next to the house.

Like my siblings, I have a bowl haircut that my mother cuts in her bathroom, holding the comb in her teeth as she carefully clips straight-across bangs. We can't afford a real hairdresser on the meager pay she earns as a freelance fashion artist. (Jack pays child support, but only the minimum; he told the judge he needed most of his money for art supplies.) She works late into the night, hunched over an easel in her bedroom, where she coaxes ladies in fancy hats and sleek shoes onto onion skin paper with slim paintbrushes and India ink.

Today, the house is full of smells like cinnamon and onion, and the windows steam up from pie baking. My mother's cheeks are flushed with color. "Who wants a sip of wine?"

How old am I? Eight? Nine? I know I'm young—these little sips are a family tradition. I step forward, open my mouth like a baby bird. The wine is cloyingly sweet and syrupy. It's full and round in my mouth. It burns a little going down but leaves a lovely fruit-tinged coating in my throat. The sip slides to my stomach, where it nestles, curled and warm.

This, I think, *is something special*.

My mother, a former model with a long, elegant neck and dark hair twisted into a chignon, is a true social drinker, indulging in the occasional highball. By the time I'm ten, she works as the advertising manager at Dillard's, a job with long, hard hours and seemingly never enough pay. She comes home at night exhausted and on edge, snapping if one of us accidentally overturns a glass of iced tea at dinner. However, she rarely drinks during the week.

My mother keeps her home bar well-stocked. The bottles reside in a cabinet near our kitchen, a small battalion of shapes and colors: brown bourbon, crystal-clear Smirnoff, emerald green crème de menthe, and the luscious jewel tones of sherries and cordials. I can't remember how old I am when she starts letting me mix her weekend whiskey sours. The process holds a stately grandeur: a squat cocktail glass filled with ice, a measure of Jim Beam poured in the elegant silver jigger then splashed over the ice, the sharp medicinal scent wafting upwards into my nose. A quick shake of the mixer, a good stir, and then the finishing touch: two bright red maraschino cherries.

I'm in my early teens when my mother invites me to join her at cocktail hour. I always add a touch more bourbon to my glass than to hers. Sitting next to her in our living room recliners, sipping and watching the evening news, I feel the tight coils within me gradually loosening. The jittery molecules that are constantly zinging and zipping around my body settle down. I feel a delicious ache in my hip bones and think: *This. This is how I'm supposed to feel.*

My first real drunken episode happens on a cold winter night at a friend's house two blocks over from mine. Her parents are out of town, though I keep this fact from my mother. "I'll pick you up at ten," she says. She doesn't want me walking home in the dark. My mother is a worrier. I am still in middle school.

The party is happening in a converted backyard garage, and everyone is there: my friend, her older brothers, and a clutch of neighborhood kids. There's a pool table, blacklight posters on the wall, a waterbed, and Led Zeppelin blaring on the stereo. Cigarette smoke clouds the darkened room.

"You want a beer?" one of the brothers asks. He's tall and rangy, acne pockmarks studding his face.

"Yes, please."

He swings open the door of a dented refrigerator, and in the flash of light, I see a case or two, something cheap, like Schlitz. I pop open the top, and the fizzy *swish!* sounds like emancipation. The first beer goes down cold and bubbly. Within moments, my personality transforms. I stop caring what the other kids think of me. Soon, I'm the big shot, cracking jokes with the older kids, playing pool, missing every shot and not giving a damn. Someone turns the stereo louder. The music thrums in my head, pounds in my chest:

Want a whole-lotta-love. Want-a-whole-lotta-love. Want-a-whole-lotta-love.

The night grows fuzzy. I'm not feeling so good. My friend leads me, stumbling, into her bedroom in the main house. She helps me up the ladder to the top bunk. I sprawl on my back and shut my eyes, the world doing its famous drunken spinning. The heater must be cranked on full blast. Waves of warm air blanket me as I fade in and out of consciousness, my wet shirt sticking to my back when I turn over. Then someone is jostling my shoulder. "Your mother is out front." I walk unsteadily to her car, praying I don't reek of beer. The cold air hits me like a tonic.

"I don't feel so good," I say, sliding in.

My mother puts her hand on my forehead.

"You feel pretty hot," she says. "Let's get you home."

In the bathroom, I peel off my damp shirt and barely make it to the toilet before the retching starts. The beer is far less tasty coming up than it was going down, and it fills the bowl with a sour, amber foam flecked with that night's dinner.

"You must have a virus," my mother says from the other side of the door.

She and I have a fractious relationship. Of her three daughters, I resemble her detested ex-husband the most, from my brown eyes to the shape of my nose. It sometimes feels like everything I do irritates her—like I'm a nuisance, my very existence a bother. She may be more powerful than

me, still willing to use her brown belt on my bare ass at times, but I'm devious, always finding ways to subvert her authority with passive aggression.

Make no mistake: deep down, I know my mother loves me and would take a bullet for me. She can be loving and fun, laughing on the couch as my sisters and I dance crazily around the living room to a wild xylophone album. Life would be so much easier if people were either all good or all bad.

Tonight, my mom's nurturing side comes out, the one that never fails to emerge when any of us are sick. She's being the warm washcloth mom, the chicken soup mom tonight. A sense of guilt intensifies my nausea. I curl above the porcelain bowl, coughing up mouthfuls of brackish foam, and make a vow: I will never drink too much again.

Let's call this red flare number one.

Chapter Two

That vow is one I would break multiple times in high school—but with less vomiting.

Not long after the garage party, I meet Vanessa, the girl who would become my best friend in middle school, and together we embark on grand adventures in illicit substances. A transplant from Alaska, she's a pretty brunette who quickly becomes the most popular girl in school. Why she picked me, a virtual nobody, to become her partner in crime is a mystery. I make her laugh, I guess, and Vanessa loves to laugh. It's a tumbling, bubbling sound that becomes like a drug to me. A fellow product of a broken home, she's riddled with insecurities despite an outward display of bravado and flirting, and she's always on the hunt for ways to change how she feels. In this, we were a perfect match.

As eighth graders, we start with pot and, of course, alcohol: Boone's Farm apple wine or whatever else we can pilfer from her mother's refrigerator or mine. Occasionally, we get the older guys Vanessa knows to buy alcohol for us. By high school, we've graduated to mescaline and LSD, which is fun until it's not; a few bad trips pour gasoline on the panic attacks I began having freshman year. They start with my becoming hyper-aware of my breathing. Within seconds, I

can't breathe normally: a vise grips my chest, my hands grow slippery, my heart thuds against my ribs. The attacks happen most often in class, where I'm trapped, a wild animal caught in a cage. The most frightening part of these episodes is that I don't know when they'll strike. Soon, the mere thought of one is enough to set the whole nightmare into motion.

I don't tell anyone about what's happening. Obviously, I am going mad. But to the outside world, to my high school comrades, I look just fine. I'm bone-skinny, with scrawny arms and legs, the thinness of which I accentuate by pegging my bell-bottom blue jeans extra tight around the thighs. All the girls do it. Our jeans have one-inch zippers and ride low on our hips. In accordance with the current style, my brown hair is long, straight, and parted in the middle. I have braces and high cheekbones. As is the trend, I eschew makeup and bra-wearing—a holdover from the sixties. In my case, it doesn't matter much, as I'm humiliatingly flat. I wear flowery Mexican peasant shirts. I look like a flower child—or maybe a Manson girl.

Early in high school, I find my tribe: all the other misbegotten youth from broken homes or dysfunctional homes or perhaps just unfortunate gene pools. We're troubled water seeking its own level. We hang out together before school, smoking cigarettes and joints at a nearby convenience store, where I flirt with boys who will wind up in jail or an early grave or God knows where. By sophomore year, some of us walk to a wooded area not far from school, where we tie off each other's arms and inject crystal meth. I only do it a half-dozen times—and I only let Vanessa shoot me up. The speed zooms up your spine like hot wax and cracks open your brain—an explosion of ecstatic bumblebees that vibrate in your body and mind for hours. Believe it or not, it feels *good*.

Throughout my undistinguished high school career, I had various school suspensions for skipping out and assorted juvenile delinquent malfeasance. I break curfew con-

stantly, run away to Port Aransas for spring break, and otherwise bedevil my increasingly furious mother. She blames most of it on Vanessa. She hates Vanessa, believing she's a bad influence. She's right; I would follow Vanessa into any dark corner she chose.

But by senior year, my best friend is gone, ejected from MacArthur High and sent to an alternative school. I've hardly acquitted myself as a student, but have amassed enough credits to enroll in a vocational program, leaving campus at noon to work in the men's underwear department at Sears.

Day after day, I stand under ghastly fluorescent lights, folding and refolding undershirts, ringing up fuzzy old grandmothers who buy crew socks for their grandsons, willing the hours to pass. The roasting popcorn kernels from the nearby snack kiosk impart a perpetual movie-lobby smell. I feel like I'm constantly coated in fake butter. Some days, when my boss orders me to redo the boxer end cap, I picture myself taking a handgun and blowing my brain to bits.

But everything changes once I meet Antonio. Tall and skinny, he works in men's suits across the aisle. A year older than me, he has slithery hips and black kinky hair. Picture a Hispanic Lionel Richie.

Antonio likes to dance disco, so we dress up in polyester outfits and hit various dance floors around town, shimmying to Donna Summer and KC and the Sunshine Band. Antonio also likes to drink sugary Seagram's and 7-Up, but since he's a good Catholic boy, we don't do drugs.

We have sex frequently on the red fake-leather back seat of my '66 Mercury Comet or against the side of his house, where he still lives with his parents, after I drop him off following a night of dancing.

I lost my virginity early in high school, to an older guy I met through Vanessa. It took repeated painful attempts on his part before my body finally unclenched and let him in. (I'll later learn that there's a term for this: vaginismus, a condition that can indicate prior sexual trauma). After a night

of copious tequila intake, we finally completed the act. Mysteriously, I didn't bleed.

Antonio and I get drunk, but it's all at acceptable levels of late seventies disco-era drunk. I don't do anything stupid—that is, until the last night we're together.

I'm due to leave for college. Even with my middling grades, I managed to get into a mediocre public university up the road in San Marcos, somehow placing out of freshman English with my ACT scores (*What?*). On our last date in San Antonio—we pledge to stay together despite the distance, but won't—Antonio and I get wasted on Seagram's. With the pristine logic of the inebriated, I decide to sneak him into my bedroom after a late night at the disco. We disrobe and start having sex on the carpeted floor between the two twin beds. Suddenly, a sliver of hallway light shines through the crack under the door. I push him off me. "Quick, get under the bed!" A second or so later, my mother turns on the bedroom light. "Hey," I slur, pulling my dress in front of myself. "What's going on?" she asks, her face clouded with sleep. "Nothing," I say. She peers deeper into the room, and there, sticking out from under the bed, are Antonio's oversized brown feet.

"What are you *doing*?" my mother whispers furiously. "Get him *out* of here!" She scuttles back to bed.

To my amazement, there are no recriminations the next day, no consequences. By then, my mother had been married to her second husband, a research scientist with a binge-drinking problem, for about a year. I try to give my stepfather a wide berth, especially when he's had a few drinks and his eyes take on a creepy, glassy look. Perhaps my mother didn't want to rile him up with news of my transgression. He and I already weren't on the best of terms. He couldn't wait for me to get out of the house.

I look in the mirror that morning, hungover, with black streaks of mascara under my eyes. *What was I thinking, bringing a guy into my childhood bedroom?* For a moment,

I know the truth: I hadn't been thinking at all. The whiskey had been in full control of my prefrontal cortex. For a few seconds, I'm awash in self-loathing. *How different, really, was I from my stepfather? A man who said and did things while drunk that made me afraid of him, that repulsed me?*

I push the thought away and start packing for college.

Red flare number two.