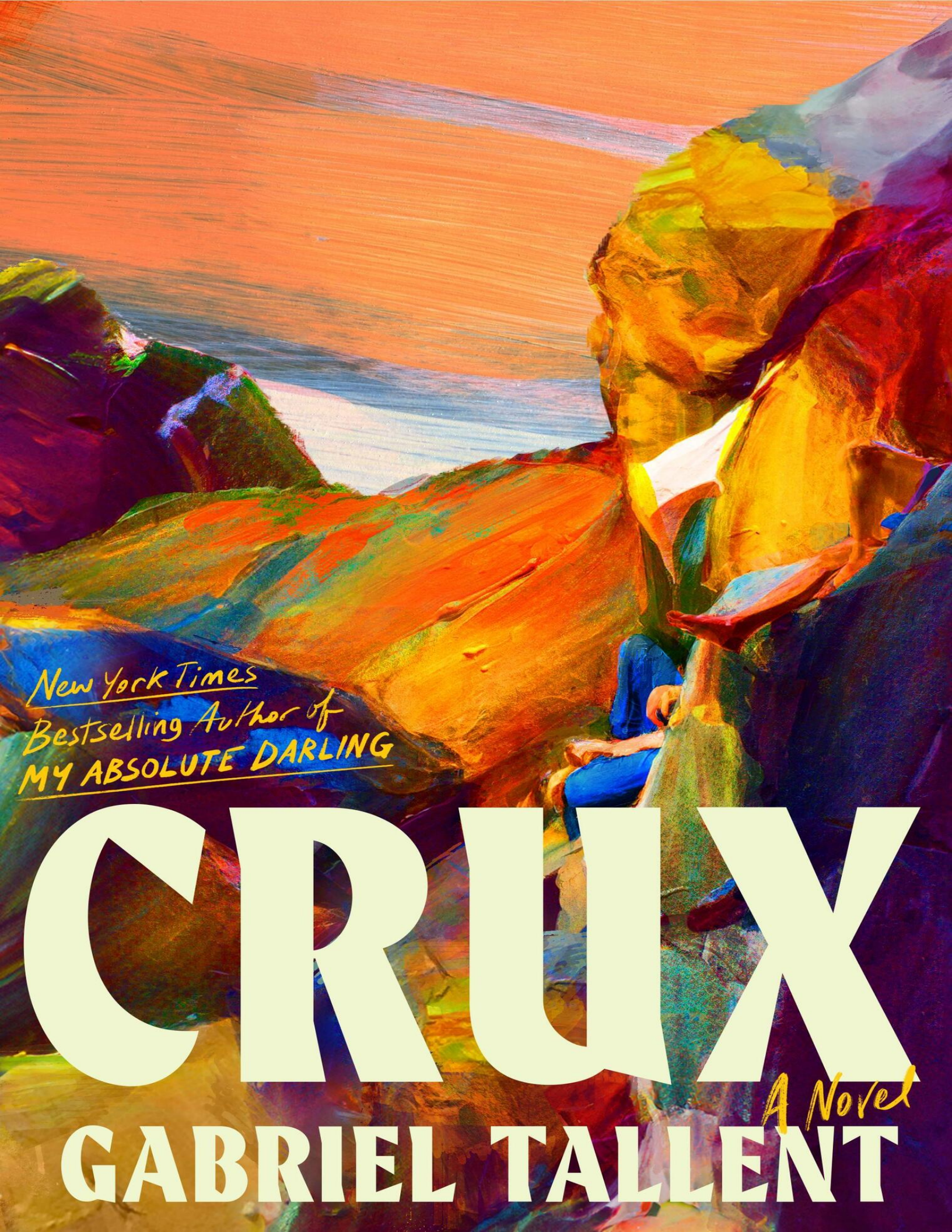




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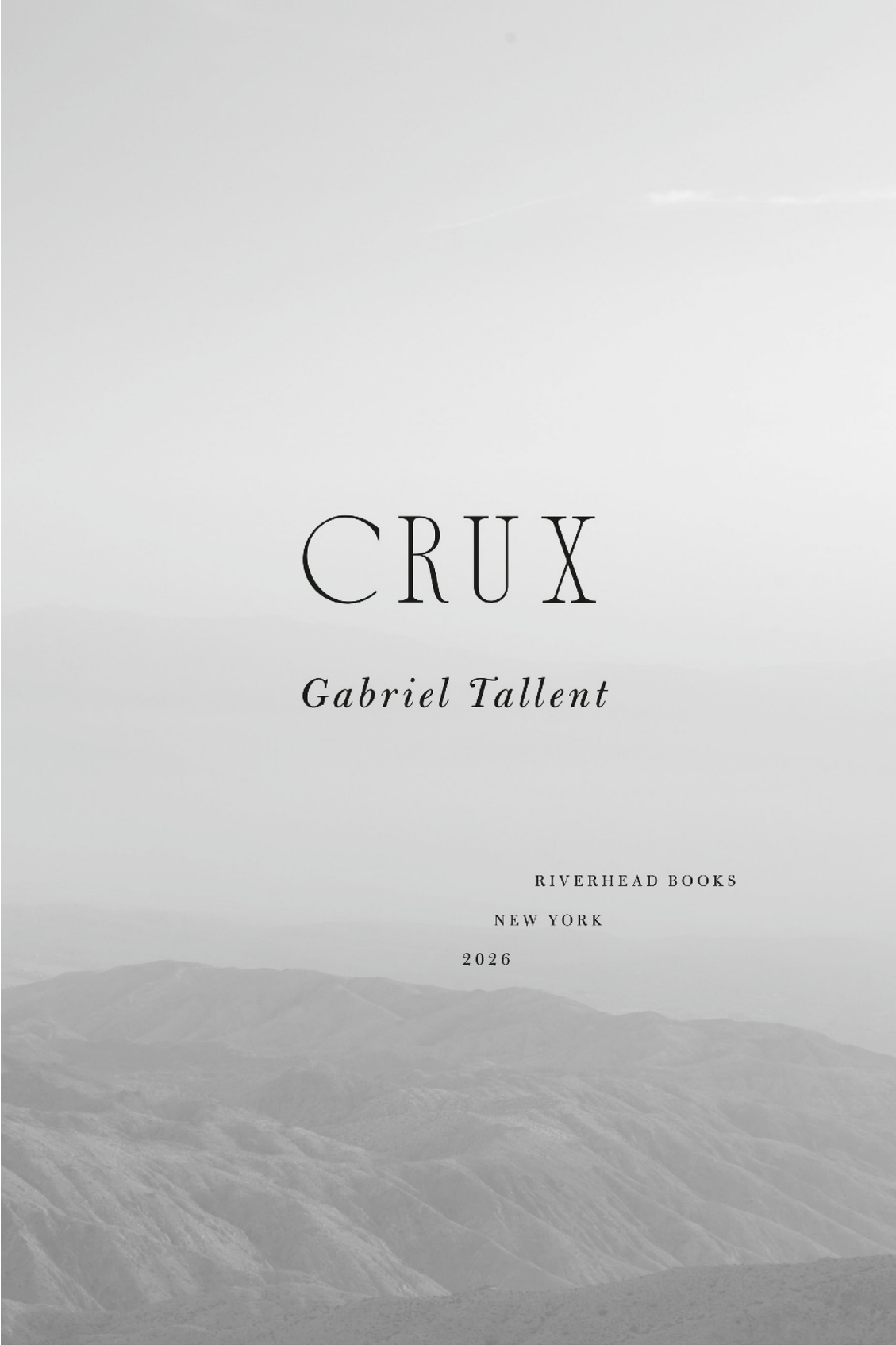
CRUX

A Novel

GABRIEL TALLENT

ALSO BY GABRIEL TALLENT

My Absolute Darling



CRUX

Gabriel Tallent

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

For Hattie

I.
THE PRINCESS

One

He heard her crunching through the sand and then she dropped into the wash and came swaggering toward him in cutoffs, baggy white muscle shirt, and chunky sneakers, carrying climbing shoes and an oversized hardbound lab notebook. The shiteatingest girl you ever saw.

“Hello, numbnuts!” she said.

“Hey there, Tams,” he said, rising to a stand. Together they followed the wash, two seventeen-year-old kids on the evening of the first day of their last year of high school. After a couple of miles, they passed through a break in low hills to a kind of parking lot full of discarded tires, shell casings, and used condoms, with plastic bags snagged in the grackle-grass. Nearby, the ruin of some strange purple house. Fridays and weekends, Dan and Tamma stayed away. This place could be a scene. It could feel not entirely safe. Once a guy had asked Tamma for “just a little dicksucking,” and she’d said, “Little in what way?” Weeknights, they had the parking lot to themselves.

The boulders lay singly or in huddles, forming alleys through which they walked, kicking aside cans and red solo cups, until they came to the last and greatest of the rocks. She was thirty-five feet high, chai-colored, glinting with mica and quartz, the edges outlined in chalk. The route was Fingerbang Princess, put up by Jane Sasaki before they were born, and graded V4. The wind stirred sand from about their feet.

Tamma said, “Fuck me, dude.”

“Every time,” Dan said.

“I could puke. Could you puke?”

Joshua trees stood limned against the whiskey-gold horizon. The clouds were tangles of cotton-candy pink. The desert otherwise sere in the