



Penguin
Random House
LIBRARY MARKETING

Debut Fiction Sampler

— SPRING 2024 —



What Will You Read Next?

THESE ARE UNCORRECTED PROOFS.
PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE FOR PUBLICATION UNTIL
YOU CHECK YOUR COPY AGAINST THE FINISHED BOOK.

Excerpt from *Summer After Summer: A Novel*
© 2024 by Lauren Bailey

Excerpt from *Rabbit Hole*
© 2024 by Kate Brody

Excerpt from *The Fellowship of Puzzlemakers: A Novel*
© 2024 by Samuel Burr

Excerpt from *Daughters of Shandong*
© 2024 by Eve J. Chung

Excerpt from *The Husbands: A Novel*
© 2024 by Holly Gramazio

Excerpt from *All We Were Promised: A Novel*
© 2024 by Ashton Lattimore

Excerpt from *Oye: A Novel*
© 2024 by Melissa Mogollon

Excerpt from *Sylvia's Second Act: A Novel*
© 2024 by Hillary Yablon

All rights reserved.

First published by Doubleday, Berkley, Ballantine, Hogarth, and Pamela Dorman Books which are divisions of Penguin Random House.

First published by Alcove Press.
First published by Soho Crime.

First Printing, 2024
First Printing, 2024

Copyright 2024
Copyright 2024

All rights reserved.



REGISTERED TRADEMARKS

Printed in the United States of America.

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

These are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the authors' imaginations or a used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party Web sites or their content.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

Spring 2024 Debut Fiction Sampler

— TABLE OF CONTENTS —

What Will You Read Next?

Summer After Summer: A Novel

by Lauren Bailey 3

Rabbit Hole

by Kate Brody 27

The Fellowship of Puzzlemakers: A Novel

by Samuel Burr 45

Daughters of Shandong

by Eve J. Chung 61

The Husbands: A Novel

by Holly Gramazio 79

All We Were Promised: A Novel

by Ashton Lattimore 99

Oye: A Novel

by Melissa Mogollon 113

Sylvia's Second Act: A Novel

by Hillary Yablon 131

Summer After Summer

A NOVEL

LAUREN BAILEY

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real or actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2024 by Lauren Bailey

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Alcove Press, an imprint of The Quick Brown Fox & Company LLC.

Alcove Press and its logo are trademarks of The Quick Brown Fox & Company LLC.

Library of Congress Catalog-in-Publication data available upon request.

ISBN (Hardcover): 978-1-63910-655-4

ISBN (ebook): 978-1-63910-656-1

Cover design by Sandra Chiu

Printed in the United States.

www.alcovepress.com

Alcove Press
34 West 27th St., 10th Floor
New York, NY 10001

First Edition: May 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER ONE

June 2023

On the day I leave Wes, I get into my car in a state of shock and drive out of New York without looking back.

It took longer than it should have to move out of our apartment, but it feels like less time than it takes to get to the Hamptons on a Friday in late June.

Though it's been years since I've made this journey, I should've remembered how the snarl of the Long Island Parkway makes my heart race and my palms sweat against the steering wheel. How the unpredictable stops of the other cars mean that I'm constantly slamming on the brakes and skidding to a stop just before I hit their bumper, my eyes racing to the rearview mirror to see if I'm about to get rear-ended.

I should've left earlier, but it didn't work out that way. Instead, I'm caught with all the other hopefuls, stop-starting our way to the first weekend of summer, trying not to cry.

My car is packed to the rafters with my things. I didn't have time to sort/keep/toss; once I'd made the decision to go, I just needed to bounce. So, I threw as many of my belongings as I could into a set of suitcases I'm pretty sure are mine, and a few large black garbage bags,

and stuffed them into my car. I don't even know if I have everything I need for the summer, but I'll figure that out when I get there.

Home.

I'm on my way to Southampton to help my father clear out the house my family's owned for generations. I grew up in that house, but as much as I love it, I haven't lived there for more than a summer since I went away to college.

The sale has been a long time coming, my father's money draining away like a leaky boat. He's never been good with money, though it's his "job" to manage the family's generational resources. Until the markets collapsed in 2008, he'd run the enterprise well enough to keep the roof intact and the grounds tended. Since then, there've been more and more financial hiccups, like the aftershocks of an earthquake. One year, the taxes weren't paid. Another, the power got turned off for a week. You get the idea.

When asked what he was doing about it, my father would always stare off into the middle distance, as if he was trying to recall something from long ago, and not the five "Final Notices" from the power company sitting on his desk, unopened. Then he'd change the topic, telling some story about a friend he'd run into in town and how *old* he looked, how very *run down*.

But expounding on the neighbors' physical deterioration didn't solve the problem of too much property and too little cash flow. We'd been trying to convince him to sell for years, until the bank took the decision out of his hands. The sale was negotiated swiftly and without any involvement from me at my request, the bare details sent in an email. The closing is at the end of August. My father and all of the family's possessions need to be out of the house by then.

My older sister, Charlotte—who still lives at home, but never made any effort that I'm aware of to stop the financial slide—called two weeks ago, in a panic, to tell me that he hadn't even started packing.

"What am I supposed to do about it?" I asked, holding up a finger to Justine, the student I was working with after school in the music room.

"Come," Charlotte pleaded. "Help."

"Take over, you mean. Get it done."

"Well . . ."

This is always the role I play in the family, even though I'm the middle child. I'm supposed to be the irresponsible one, but somehow, after our mother died when I was fourteen, it was suddenly my job to make sure the school fees got paid and we all had uniforms that fit when the semester started.

"I'll help," she said, but I doubted it.

"What about Sophie?"

"She's got the kids. She already complains constantly about how they're too much for her."

I couldn't help but nod in agreement while Justine pounded the piano keys in annoyance. She was eight and still thought the world revolved around her. My sister, Sophie, is the baby of the family, and she's clung to that role fiercely, even though she was the first to marry and the only one of us to have kids. The truth is, I'm not close to either of my sisters, but that's as much my fault as theirs.

"I can't just drop my life, Charlotte. My husband. It's going to take months to clean out that house."

She ignored my reference to Wes. "Doesn't the school year end in a couple of days?"

"So?"

"Well . . ."

I stared at the colorful wall, painted in a mural of dancing instruments. "Can you please say what you mean instead of speaking in ellipses?"

Charlotte sighed. "You know you're the only one Father listens to. And you don't want everything to end up in a dumpster, do you? Not all of Mom's things."

Now *I* wanted to pound the piano keys. Charlotte can be manipulative when she wants to be, which is more often than she should. "You'd do that?"

"Why should it be my responsibility? Just because I live here? He's your father too."

"I know."

"I'm not going to be the only one to take care of him."

"I didn't ask you to."

"You kind of did, though, Olivia, when you moved away and never came back."

I wanted to contradict her, but she was right. As much as I loved it, Southampton was a crucible of bad memories, and I'd insulated myself from them as much as I could, returning rarely—and lately, not at all.

I agreed to think about it and hung up. Then I spent the next twenty minutes calming Justine down, who'd felt *ignored* and was going to tell her mummy that I wasn't giving her the right amount of attention. I knew better than to try to reason her out of her tantrum. Her mother paid extra for her lessons, and the income I made teaching kids like her to play mediocre piano after school was an important supplement to my inadequate teacher's salary.

Despite the guilt Charlotte laid at my door, I'd decided I wasn't going to go. But then it turned out that I *could* just drop my life *and* my husband; that I had to because I couldn't breathe in New York anymore, and so here I was.

Another car stops suddenly in front of me, and I apply the brakes as my heart skips a beat, praying they don't give out. My car is ten years old and hasn't had a tune-up in years. I never remember to do stuff like that, but Wes is always telling me he worries whenever I drive it. Not enough to take it in himself, though, and over time, the tone of the concern has shifted from fretting about my safety to saying things like, "*If you end up killing someone with that thing, don't blame me.*"

When your husband switches from caring for your well-being to worrying about the safety of others, well, let's just say it's a warning sign—and in my case, one of the many reasons my things are stuffed into this death trap.

My car stops right before the black bumper in front of me, and I breathe a sigh of relief, my heart racing like I've been sprinting through the rain. There's a sticker on it that reads: "If you can read this, you're too close." I let it get a car's length ahead of me and check the upcoming sign. It's my exit. I just have to navigate across three lanes of traffic, and I can be free of this particular hell.

I get off the highway and drive through town, passing familiar restaurants and new logos in old places. I cut away before the main street, not wanting to get caught in the stop-and-go traffic as the tourists pop in and out of the cute candy-colored stores. I turn onto First Neck and aim for the beach, turning right when it morphs into Meadow. I pass the Crowder's massive turreted home with its thatched roof, then

a new build I don't recognize that looks like it belongs in Malibu, not Cryder Beach.

And then I'm at Taylor House, its weathered shingled sides rising from the long pale grasses that grow out of the sandy dunes that surround it, its lighthouse windows glinting in the sun.

The house is a pile, built at the beginning of the last century, when the family was still accumulating money rather than watching it dwindle. We'd never been able to settle on how many rooms it had—twenty-six or twenty-seven, depending on who you asked and whether the secret room behind the library shelves counted. (Obviously, yes.) Either way, it was more rooms than anyone needed, and more rooms than this family could afford.

As I bring my car to a stop, I stare up at it, feeling nostalgic. Memories click through my brain with a swiftness that leaves me breathless, and I'm relieved that soon I won't have this place to remind me anymore. Another family will build a life here, for good or bad, and it won't mean anything to me.

I wonder for the first time who bought it and whether they're planning to tear it down and build some post-modernist collection of boxes like so many others have done. I promise myself that I won't be around to find out, that this is the last summer I'll spend here. Once the past is tucked away, and Charlotte and my father are settled somewhere reasonable, I'll lock up my memories and throw away the key.

Charlotte comes out of the front door, summoned by the sound of my tires on the gravel drive. She's wearing an off-white linen jumpsuit, tied at the waist with a tight cinch. A pair of oversized black sunglasses hide her dark eyes.

When I get out of the car, I can't help but notice the weeds poking through the stones, and the overgrown flower border; how much slumpier the place looks in general from the last time I was here.

Charlotte, though, is the same—thin and waspish, her long, dark brown hair still glossy and blunt at her shoulders, her clothes hanging off her because she doesn't eat, she never has. At thirty-seven, she could still pass for twenty-five. She has one of those faces, both thin and plump enough that it doesn't seem to age, especially since she's always been careful about the sun.

“Olivia!” She tips her sunglasses down to peer at me. Her skin is almost the same color as her outfit. “*What* are you wearing?”

I check myself, unable to recall what I threw on before I tossed the last bag into the car. I see a pair of black leggings that are a size too small and a T-shirt for a Bon Jovi concert I forgot I even attended. I haven’t had a haircut in months, and the lack of sun and general malaise I’ve been feeling for too long has turned my hair mousy. Add in the fact that I spent too much time in the sun with too little sunscreen for years, and I doubt anyone would guess I’m one minute younger than the thirty-five I am.

“My white jumpsuit is at the cleaners.”

Charlotte isn’t sure how to take this, so she air-kisses me instead, one kiss near, but not quite on, each cheek, an affectation she picked up during a summer in Montreal to learn French. Her vocabulary never made it past ordering off the menu in a pretentious way in French restaurants, but Charlotte isn’t the sort of person who accepts personal limitations.

“Well, you look dreadful. Thank *gawd* the garden party is tomorrow.”

“Garden party?”

“Didn’t I tell you? We’re kicking off the summer with a hurrah in the garden. Don’t worry, I’ve arranged everything.”

“Smoked salmon sandwiches and gin?”

“Precisely. You’ll be there?”

It’s the last thing I want to do, but that’s what this whole summer’s going to be like. I might as well accept it now. “Yes.”

“I assume you have something else to wear?”

I point my thumb at the car. “Somewhere in there, I’m sure.”

“I’ve put you in your old room—hope you don’t mind. It’ll be hot as blazes most nights. The air is on the fritz, and we aren’t going to be fixing it before we leave.”

“William must be complaining about that.”

“We’ve put window units in his room and mine. They do all right. He spends most of the day at the club, so it’s not too bad, really.” Charlotte smiles, proud that she’s managed our father’s whims to a degree that kept his complaining to a minimum. William doesn’t suffer, well, anything, and has always been vociferous in his complaints at the least hint of discomfort.

“Is there a window unit for me?”

Charlotte raises a bony shoulder. “I didn’t know you’d be coming when I bought them.”

“Fair enough.”

Most days, the breeze from the ocean keeps the house tolerable for sleeping, but on a still night it can be murder on the third floor. When we were kids, we used to sleep in the summer house, but I’m not sure it’s hospitable now.

“You want to get your things?” Charlotte says. “It’s hot out here.”

I walk to the back of my car, not waiting for Charlotte to help, based on experience, but she surprises me by coming up to my shoulder and peering into the cargo area. “Is that all of it?”

“Everything but the furniture.”

“He’ll take that, I suppose?”

“I don’t care where it goes.”

I reach in and grab one of the suitcases and a large satchel that has my toiletries and overnight things. I decide to move the rest of it later. It’s coming up on five, and if there’s one thing I know without having to ask, it’s that cocktails will appear shortly, on the veranda. I need a gin and tonic (or ten) to wash the taste of today out of my mouth.

“Is Aunt Tracy here?” Every summer since my mother died, her best friend has been making us delicious meals. Cooking is her passion.

“She arrived a couple of weeks ago.”

“How’s she taking the sale?”

Charlotte shrugs, then tilts her head back and looks at the house. You need to do that to get it all in one view. “It’s funny to think of not living here. Sometimes I’m quite *sad* about it.”

She sounds sincere, but it’s often hard to know with Charlotte. It’s hard *to* know Charlotte. She’s always been a self-contained unit, even before our mother died. Afterward, she grew a shell around her that was hard to penetrate. Eventually, I stopped trying.

“Where will you go?”

“Not sure yet. But *that man* paid enough to settle all the debts and keep Father until the end of his days and then some. We’ll each get our share, so I’ll buy something, I think.”

All of this is new information to me, and my head's playing catch-up. I latch onto the least confusing part of what she just said. "Who ended up buying it? No one told me."

Charlotte turns toward me, her eyes as dark as beads. "You haven't heard?"

"No. Who is it?"

"I can hardly believe it myself, and where he got the money, I don't know, but it was Fred."

CHAPTER TWO

June 2003

"I'm *so bored*," Ashley says, swatting at a fly on her long, thin, already tanned legs.

We're sitting at the pool at the Southampton Lawn and Tennis Club, facing the ocean. Justin Timberlake's "Rock Your Body" is playing on a loop on Ashley's iPod, which is sitting between us on a small table, with two sweating Diet Cokes.

"You've only been here for two days," I say.

Ashley checks her pale pink nails. "*Bored*."

"I'm not the program director."

"But you are."

"Why don't you take a tennis lesson?"

"One tennis freak in my entourage is enough."

"I'm not a freak."

"Uh-huh. That's why you have a list of tournaments you want to win and the ages you want to win them at?"

"It's bad to have goals?"

"It's weird to basically already have a job when you're not even sixteen."

“But this is when I lay the foundation, I . . .” I glare at her. “You’re trying to push my buttons.”

“It’s so easy to do it!”

“Fine, fine. No tennis for Ash. Got it.” I think about it for a minute. “You could swim?”

Ashley puts her hand in front of her mouth and pats it in an exaggerated way. Her chunky highlighted hair flows to her narrow shoulders in beachy waves.

“I’m out of ideas,” I say, and scrunch down on my pool chair. My own hair is sun-bleached and pulled back in a high ponytail, still wet and smelling faintly of salt from my workout.

Unlike Ashley, I’m perfectly happy to sit around and do nothing in the hours I have to myself, which aren’t many. Every day is the same—three hours of tennis in the morning, starting at the crack of dawn, then an hour in the gym. Late afternoon is for piano lessons, which I want to give up. But it was my mom’s favorite thing, and since she died last year, it’s the only way I feel connected to her.

In between, I hang with Ashley at the club. It has ten fenced-off lawn tennis courts, a saltwater pool, and an old clubhouse with a gabled roof, weather-beaten cedar shingles, and a long wrap-around porch. It’s stuffy and exclusive, all the things my father loves and I kind of hate. But it’s where my tennis coach is in the summer, and my scholarship is attached to him.

“What about your birthday?” Ashley says.

“What about it?”

“Sweet sixteen and never been kissed.”

“I have too.”

“Spin the bottle doesn’t count.”

I turn over onto my stomach so she doesn’t see me blush. My sixteenth birthday is a week away, and I haven’t had a real kiss. I’m obviously pathetic. “Who has time for boys?”

“Uh, *everyone*.”

“The boys here are all dumb.”

“But are they cute? That’s all that matters for kissing.”

I rest my chin on my hands. I can hear my Aunt Tracy telling me to put sunscreen on my back, but I ignore her voice in my head. I love

her, but when she tries too hard to mother me, it's more than I can take. "Hmmm. Well, let's put it on the list then."

"Top ten goals for summer?"

"That's the one."

"Perfect." Ashley reaches into her pastel beach bag and pulls out her bright pink day planner. She flips to a page that she's marked with a Post-it: *Ash and Olivia's Top Ten Summer Goals*. The words are surrounded by stars and fireworks, and she's left slots one to three open. Number ten is *Perfect tan*. She puts *Olivia gets kissed* at number two.

"What are you saving number one for? Sex or car?"

Ashley's been going back and forth on which one she wants more since yesterday. Even though it doesn't make sense for a sixteen-year-old in Manhattan to have a car, she wants a BMW 3 series for the "status." I'd poked a finger in my mouth and pretended to hurl when she said that, and she left the space blank.

"I've decided on sex." Ashley stretches her arms above her head. She's wearing a tiny bikini with black and white polka dots that I'd never feel comfortable in. My shoulders are too broad from tennis, and I have more muscles than normal everywhere else. I'm happy in my tankini that doesn't make me feel like everyone's looking at me.

"Bold choice since there's no boy in sight."

She sticks her tongue out at me. "Ooh, I know what we should do!"

"What?"

"Go to the beach."

"You want to go to the beach? With the *sand*? And the *tourists*?" Ashley's inherited her parents' snooty attitude toward the vacationers who are just like them, minus the millions of dollars they had to buy a house in one of the new developments a mile from here.

"I was thinking more of the umbrella boys."

"Oh." I sit up. The public beach near the club is staffed with teenage boys for the summer. They rent out chairs and umbrellas and run the concession stand. "That's mostly guys from the local high school."

"So?"

"I know all of them already. Since kindergarten."

"Maybe they've grown up since you switched to Hampton Prep."

“I guess.”

Ashley checks her flip phone quickly. “It’s almost lunch time. If we go now, we can get food from the Shack.”

The thought of one of their lobster rolls does sound good. “But what about the calories?”

“It’s first week. No diets.” She stands and starts stuffing one of the club towels into her beach bag.

“You’re not supposed to take that off the property,” I say, then regret it. Ashley knows the rules, and I don’t need to be reminding her like I’m her mother. She still has one of those.

Ashley brings her Vuarnets down over her eyes. They’re pink and cat-eyed, and she brought me a pair too. “I thought you weren’t the program coordinator.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Come on, let’s go.”

I collect my things, shove my feet into my flip-flops, and follow Ashley out of the club grounds, walking single file behind her down the narrow path through the dunes. The club owns its own strip of beach, the Atlantic stretching out in front of it, the cold waves rolling in and crashing into the white-sand shore. As usual, the club’s beach is abandoned, but the public beach is full. There’s music blaring from the speaker on the lifeguard’s station, and the blue and white umbrellas they rent out are twisting in the wind.

“You sure you want to do this?” I say to Ashley, watching the sand fly up from the back of her flip-flops. They’re Lanzarote she told me, as if I’m supposed to know what that means.

She glances back. “You have a better idea?”

“I think we’ve already established that I do not.”

She grins, her straight teeth newly free of the braces that she’d hated. “Well, come on then. Your future awaits!” She points her arm to the sky, mocking herself and our mission. But she doesn’t stop and neither do I. Instead, we clamber over the berm that separates the two beaches, and plop down onto the public side as the wind whips my ponytail against my neck.

“Who looks like a good prospect?” Ashley asks as she shades her eyes from the sun. The sunnies are cute, but they don’t block out much light.

I scan the crowd. Six guys our age are standing by the umbrella station, wearing khaki shorts and white polos. I recognize five of them from middle school. Guys named Dave and Dan and Mike, who thought it was funny to pull on my braids and tear down my art projects from the teacher's honor wall. I have no interest in speaking to them.

But there's another boy—tall, athletic, with dark hair that curls across his forehead—I've never seen before.

"Ooh la la, who is *that*?" Ashley gives a low whistle.

"Shh!"

"He can't hear us. Come on—let's say hi." Ash tugs on my arm.

"Ouch."

"That wasn't hard."

"I wrenched my shoulder when I was playing this morning."

"You should give that up."

"The ticket to my future? No way." Ashley doesn't understand my passion for tennis, or why I work so hard at it. But she still has a trust fund, so I don't blame her.

"Maybe you're about to meet your future right now."

"On Cooper's Beach? I doubt it."

"Come on, quick. Before Becky gets to him."

She points to where Becky Johnson, a girl Ashley refers to as—no joke—her *nemesis*, is talking to the new guy and flipping her butter-yellow hair over her shoulder. She's wearing a small bikini top and cut-off jean shorts.

Ash hustles me over the hard white sand, past multiple families with bickering children and babies in sagging diapers.

"Excuse me," Ash says with a voice that's strikingly like her mother's. "We'd like to rent an umbrella."

New Guy stands a little taller at the tone and picks up a clipboard while Becky shoots daggers at us. "Name?"

"It's for my friend here." Ashley nudges me forward.

Our eyes connect, mine and New Guy's, and it's not like in the books. There's no jolt of attraction or thunderbolt or anything, but there is a warm feeling in my chest because this boy is very cute. His eyes are a deep blue—*like the ocean after a storm*, I can't help but think, even though I feel silly, and he has a small trickle of freckles across his straight nose. He's tall enough that I feel small next to him, which

doesn't happen often when you're five eight and the boys haven't finished growing yet. His name tag says "Fred."

"Name?"

"Olivia Taylor."

He writes it down with a black gel pen. "You want a lounge too?" He says the word in a way I haven't heard before, the *un* sound elongated.

"Where are you from?"

"Boston. Here for the summer. You?"

"From here."

"You're the first person I've met from here." He smiles at me, and maybe there *is* a jolt of something. Whether it's Ashley's elbow in my back or the annoyed stare I'm getting from Becky, I'm not sure. It could be Fred, though, which is . . . I don't know what this is.

"We do exist."

"Ha. Yes. I know. My aunt and uncle live here."

"Where?"

He mentions a house and a street name, and I know exactly which one he's talking about. An older couple without any children bought it during the winter, and for a week it was the talk of the town. The talk of my father anyway, who's always extremely interested in the pedigree of anyone new who moves to Southampton.

"So, did you want the lounge?" Fred says, showing his accent again.

"Do we, Ash?"

"It's ten dollars more."

I blush at the mention of money. I hadn't even thought about the fact that we'd have to pay, which is stupid. At the club, everything is paid for by chits that get collated once a month and mailed out to our parents. Or that's how it works for Ash. I teach clinics three times a week to the younger kids, to work off what I spend on Diet Coke and burgers.

I can't say any of this to Fred, so I pat myself down like I've seen my father do too many times when he's "forgotten" his wallet at his favorite restaurant. When William does this, the *maître d'* makes cooing noises and says he'll add it to his tab, but that's not going to work here.

“I’ve got it,” Ashley says, taking out a Black Amex that belongs to her father. “You take cards?”

“Cash only.”

“Hmm.” Ashley taps the card against her chin. “We’re good for it, obviously.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve got to get cash up front. Don’t want to get fired during my first week.”

“Of course not,” I say, tugging on Ash’s arm to keep her from embarrassing me any further. “We’ll do it another time.”

“I’m here every day,” Fred says to me with that same slow smile.

The tips of my ears are burning, and it’s not from the sun. “Good to know.”

He raises his eyebrows twice quickly, then turns back to Becky, who’s got her arms crossed in a way my mom always used to tell me made me look like a spoiled brat.

“Come on,” I say to Ash. “Hopefully they take your card at the Shack.”

We walk toward the parking lot where the Shack sets up its food truck in the summer. I glance back at Fred, hoping to get a last look at him so I can memorize what he looks like. Becky’s still talking at him, but he’s watching us, watching *me*, and when our eyes lock, his grin goes wide, and I’m definitely feeling something, though it’s hard to describe what it is.

I think it means I want him to kiss me, but that’s silly because we only just met.

“I told you going to the beach was a good idea,” Ashley says as Fred gives me a friendly wave.

My hand raises to repeat his gesture. “I’ll never doubt you again.”

CHAPTER THREE

June 2023

“Fred Webb?” I say to Charlotte as I struggle to bring my bags through the ornate front door. As predicted, Charlotte’s interest in my things was purely sociological.

“Do we know another Fred?”

“I don’t know,” I say petulantly. “Do we?”

“We do not.”

I pull the suitcase over the threshold and drop my bags onto the black and white marble floor. Cold in winter, slippery in summer, it’s classically beautiful and totally impractical. But my mother loved it, and like too much in this family, if she dictated it, then it stayed.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Charlotte gives me an elegant shrug of the shoulder, but I know why. If I knew that Fred had anything to do with the sale, I wouldn’t have come home, no matter how much I wanted to get out of New York.

Damn it.

I breathe in and out slowly as the house’s smell envelops me. Lemon-scented cleaner and the deep tang of the ocean that you can hear if you stand still. It was the lullaby of my childhood, and even now, whenever I sleep near the ocean, I feel at peace.

But not today.

“Have you seen him?” I ask. “Fred?”

“It was all done through the lawyers.”

I can hear my heart hammering in my ears. Fred. Fred. *Fred.*

If I were smart, I’d wheel my bag right back out of here and drive somewhere else.

But I’ve never been smart where Fred is concerned.

“What could he want with Taylor House?” I try to keep the anguish out of my voice while I gesture to the crumbling plaster and the walls that haven’t been repainted in twenty years.

“Honestly? He’ll probably tear it down and build one of those ultra-modern places like everyone else does.”

But why this house, I want to shout. He could do that to anyone.

But I already know the answer.

It’s *this* house because it’s mine.

* * *

“Oh, Olivia, you’re here,” my father says as we walk into the front parlor. When he’s not at the club, he has a set pattern through the house during the day, following the best light like a sundial. “Good, good.”

He opens his arms, gesturing for me to come closer. He’s wearing what I always think of as his summer wardrobe—madras golf shorts and a matching polo. At sixty-five, he has the body of a bon vivant: a veined nose and a paunch that sticks out too far, but he’s still charming and handsome with his shock of white hair, bright blue eyes, and an easy smile that falls into a laugh when he’s amused, which is often. Despite his tendency to complain, he’s always been a good-time Charley, cheers of “*William!*” following him wherever he goes.

I kiss him on his left cheek. He smells like cinnamon gum and Old Spice, and I start to choke up as he pulls me into a brief hug. It’s been too long since I’ve seen him. I’ve been so wrapped up in my own drama, I didn’t make the time for him that I should have.

But I’m here now, and despite the fact that I’m still reeling from hearing that Fred Webb bought this house, I’m glad.

“Let me get a look at you.” He holds me by the arms and inspects me.

I cringe, thinking about what he's seeing. My skin is pale because I've been inside all semester, and my face is somehow both gaunt and swollen from too little eating and too much drinking. I can tell by his expression that he thinks I look frightful, and he's not wrong.

His mouth is twitching as he fights the urge to say it. "Good to have you here. The salt air will do you good, I'm sure."

"Thanks, William." I started calling him that after my mother got sick when I was twelve, and it stuck.

Back then, everyone thought I was precocious. Now, it's a habit that everyone accepts. The truth is, I did it to create distance between us. Because if parents were going to be people who died unexpectedly, it was safer to keep them at bay.

I wait for him to ask me about Wes, but he doesn't. Instead, he says, "Shall we have a drink?"

Drinks on the veranda occur every day at five, rain or shine, sleet, or poverty. The liquor bill is the only one that always gets paid on time. And William avoids messy topics, such as leaving one's husband, like the plague.

Not that I've told any of them many details. I just texted the basics to Charlotte and Sophie in our rarely used group chat and told them when I'd be arriving.

It's the WASP way, after all. My family are gold-medal recipients in stuffing things down and withholding emotions.

"Sounds good," I say about the drink.

He crooks his arm through mine, and we walk through the patio doors. The veranda's a wide expanse of porch and patio, partly covered, that stops at the bright green lawn. A local boy mows it twice a week for a minimal fee, so it's well maintained in a way that most of the grounds aren't.

I stop and take in the view. The sky is that clear blue of early summer before the heat haze sets in. There are high, puffy clouds gliding lazily above it, and just over the grass-covered dunes is the ocean, its roaring waves dulled by the distance. I breathe in and out deeply again, like I did in the hallway, taking in the salt air, feeling some of the anxiety and sorrow seep out of me.

It will do me good to be here, the past and Fred notwithstanding.

“What do you think about this sad business?” my father asks, his hands on his hips, facing the view.

“Selling?”

“What else?”

“We’ve been trying to get you to do it for years.”

“Yes, yes, but the way the bank just stepped in and . . . I was getting around to it. They didn’t have to act so hastily.”

Aunt Tracy comes outside carrying gin and tonics on a tray, along with small bowls of cheese straws. I eye them hungrily, feeling weak and needy. There won’t be any dinner, or any more cheese straws, until eight, and what with the hasty packing of everything I own, I didn’t get lunch.

I bury my instinct to grab one of the bowls and shove its contents in my mouth. Instead, I take the tray from Aunt Tracy, put it down, and pull her into a hug. “It’s so good to see you.”

“It’s been too long since you were home,” she says when we break apart. Aunt Tracy’s coloring is dark, with white streaks in her short, thick chestnut hair, and laugh lines on her honey-colored face. She’s wearing light gray slacks and a white poplin shirt with a coral necklace.

“I know. Don’t scold me.”

“Your father’s been missing you.”

“He’ll be sick of me by summer’s end.”

She smiles. “I’m making your favorite for dinner.”

“Seafood paella? You’re the best.” I pick up a gin and tonic and a bowl of cheese straws, and drift toward where Charlotte and my father are talking over their own drinks. His is half gone already.

“So, what’s the plan?” I say. “Where should we start with the clean-out?”

Charlotte shoots me a look. “We were talking about the garden party tomorrow.”

“Ah.”

“You’ll be attending, dear,” William says.

“I guess so.”

“Good, good. All the usual suspects—the Phelps and the Thorpes—and your sister’s family.”

“And I invited Ashley,” Charlotte says.

I ignore Charlotte’s addition. “Sophie made it down okay?”

Sophie's husband's family has a place a mile from here, where they spend the summer, letting their boisterous boys run around while her husband, Colin, commutes back and forth to Manhattan. I like Colin, but I find my nephews exhausting, even though I work with children. Maybe it's because of that. It's one thing for kids who aren't related to me to give me a hard time. Another entirely when it's my blood.

"She's been down for a week, complaining daily," Charlotte says.

"What's it this time?"

"Her back, apparently."

Charlotte and I exchange a glance, tamping down our laughter. One thing we've always connected over is how Sophie is old before her time.

"That's a shame."

"To already have problems with your back," William says, "and so young too. I blame the children."

"Naturally."

"They run around like banshees. You should see them when they come here. Climbing all over me and the furniture. Your mother wouldn't have liked it."

"Mom would have loved it," I correct. "She was always scampering around with us."

"Was she?" He sips at his drink with that faraway look he usually reserves for financial matters. I long ago decided that his vagueness was a deliberate choice. A way of pre-creating an excuse when he lets the details of life get away from him. He can be as sharp as a tack when he wants to be.

"She was," I say gently, then turn to the view again. I sip at my drink, that bitter mix of alcohol, tonic, and lime I always associate with home.

"Be that as it may . . . the garden party. She always loved the garden parties."

"She did."

"And everyone will be so glad to see you. Only, perhaps you could dress up for it?"

"Don't worry, I won't wear my sweatpants."

"That's all right, then. Barry, the lawyer, is coming too, and his daughter. Have you met her? She and your sister have been spending a lot of time together."

There's a trace of a blush on Charlotte's cheeks. "Ann's a lawyer too, Father. She works with him. They're partners. And there were a lot of details to work out."

I'm intrigued. It's so rare to see Charlotte discomfited. "I'm looking forward to meeting her."

"And the new owner, of course," William says, rocking on his heels. "A rich man from London. Though I hear he's American. He bought the place sight unseen; can you believe it?"

A lump forms in my throat. "Fred. You invited him?"

He rattles the ice around in his glass. "Who's Fred?"

"Mr. Webb. The man who bought the house."

"Ah yes, that's right. Some bigwig in shipping, they tell me. Or is it a cruise line?"

"Shipping," I say through clenched teeth.

"Made a fortune, I understand. And bought this place, like I said, sight unseen." William shakes his head at the marvel of it.

"He has seen it."

"The virtual tour, you mean. They came and filmed that one day, and it took hours. I had to shoo them out eventually, but then they insisted on taking drone shots, flying that little buzzing thing up there over the house. What for, I can't imagine."

I finish my drink in one long gulp. I can't tell whether he's deliberately misunderstanding me or not. It's possible he's forgotten all about Fred. His daughters' personal lives aren't the sort of thing he keeps track of so long as the G&Ts flow nicely at five PM, and dinner is on the table promptly at eight.

"He's really coming to the party?" I say to Charlotte, pulling her aside as William walks out into the lawn to stretch his legs.

"Father insisted on inviting him."

"You could've warned me. You could've warned me about all of it."

"You're not *still* carrying a torch for him are you?" Charlotte's tone is incredulous, but her eyes are filled with curiosity. "After all these years?"

"It's not *all these years*," I say, then bite back the rest of my answer. It's been five.

RABBIT HOLE

A NOVEL

KATE
BRODY

"A smart and edgy mystery that kept me turning pages feverishly from start to finish."—ALEXIS SCHAITKIN, AUTHOR OF SAINT X

Copyright © 2024 by Kate Brody

All rights reserved.

Published by
Soho Press, Inc.
227 W 17th Street
New York, NY 10011

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Brody, Kate, author.
Title: Rabbit hole / Kate Brody.
Description: New York, NY : Soho Crime, [2024]
Identifiers: LCCN 2022058946

ISBN 978-1-64129-487-4

eISBN 978-1-64129-488-1

Subjects: LCSH: Missing persons—Investigation—Fiction. | Conspiracy theories—Fiction. | Electronic discussion groups—Fiction.

LCGFT: Detective and mystery fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3602.R63573 R33 2024 | DDC 813'.6—dc23/
eng/20230113

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022058946>

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

“I need you to help me with the bills,” Mom says.

“How much more?”

“No,” she says. “Not money. Well . . . maybe. But I need you to help do them.” She’s lying on the floor of the kitchen with Wolfie, her cheek pressed down to the tile. Two commas facing one another, small nothing between them.

I step over my old sick dog and Mom’s head to grab a box of cereal off the counter. “I wouldn’t lie on the floor like that. I saw ants in here last week.”

“Your father did everything online.” She strokes the bridge of bone between Wolfie’s eyes. She rubs with one finger down to his black nose and back up. His eyes close in relief. “People keep calling.”

“How? He just died.”

“They were calling before, too,” Mom says. “During the day, when you’re at work. He always said he’d handle it, but I don’t know . . .” She looks up at me. The pitch of her voice, the desperation stops me mid-chew, and I’m left with a mouthful of sharp Crunch Berries. “Please, Teddy. I can’t sleep.”

“You can come live with me,” I say, but the joke lands flat. “Mom, I’m kidding. It will be fine. I’ll do it.”

She turns back to Wolfie, and I watch them for a while. She’s no longer touching him, just staring into the milky expanse of his eyes.

I set down my bowl and get on the floor behind her quietly, carefully curling my body around hers. She is less muscular than I remember, and I can almost feel her bones, swimming in her drapery, expensive fabrics. I think of osteoporosis commercials. I think of how you never realize your parents are young until they're not anymore. Her hair is clipped up on her head, and I unclip it. I sink my face in, and it smells like her. I wrap my arm around her front and sneak a glimpse over her shoulder at Wolfie. He doesn't see me. He's pleading to her from behind the clouds, and I feel like a voyeur.

"I put everything in bags," she says. "I left them in his room."

Lately, we don't leave Wolfie alone. We don't say it, but we both know that it hurts him, all the attention. I hear him whimper when my hands roll over the tumors in his back that press against his spine. He is tired. He wants to sleep alone on the cold floor. He doesn't want to be touched and called and fed. The car, which he used to love, is now torture with all its bumps and stops. But I take him with me to the store, to the park. I can't let him be. Neither of us can. We're worried that if we give him the opportunity, he'll die on us, neatly and silently while no one is looking, not wanting anyone to make a fuss over him, and he's a good dog who doesn't deserve to die alone.

AS I MAKE MY way upstairs, it occurs to me that I'm not sure when the last time was that I walked all the way to the end of the hall, to the room I used to share with Angie.

In the years after Angie disappeared, we left everything untouched—the cliché thing where the dead kid's room becomes a museum. I even moved out, into the basement. The room felt weird without her.

When I went to college, Dad moved his stuff into our old room. He said he needed office space for god only knows what,

but then he installed blackout curtains over the windows and took down our bunk beds, erecting a metal platform with a twin mattress in its place. Mom called it his Batcave. She said she didn't like to go in there. I rarely tried. The door was always closed.

“We can't be together on this one,” she told me once, on the back porch, as the sun was setting. “He feels he has to go it alone.”

I pretended to understand what she was saying so that I could end the conversation.

The room upstairs still bears traces of Angie if you strain to spot them: her CD collection, a few pictures left on the walls, some Sharpie graffiti in the corner that used to be hidden by a poster. Now the defining characteristic of the space is Dad's incredible, shocking mess. The desk surface is piled high with used tissues and the uneaten, organic protein bars that are evi-dence of Mom's attempts to feed him. Handwritten notes cover everything like a layer of snow. They spill from desk to floor, in different shapes of crinkled, crumpled, and torn. Clothes on the ground are visibly soiled and heaped in the corner, hamperless. The room smells of human filth and decaying food. I burn with shame at the idea of anyone seeing this place. I preemptively form excuses to the most obvious question: *How could you let this happen?*

It takes me a minute to spot the bags Mom was talking about. Five double-knotted plastic shopping bags filled with bills are lined up along the wall by the door.

An IBM laptop sits next to my dad's flip phone in the center of the desk, half buried under all the garbage. The computer is asleep until I tap it. A login screen rejects my best three pass-word guesses.

I steal two black trash bags from the kitchen and get to work clearing the carpet. I fill one bag with pure waste—
food

wrappers, used napkins, and unidentifiable rot. The other gets filled with mom's smaller shopping bags and everything else, including:

- A pharmacy receipt for antacids and anti-depressants
- An invoice for \$90.95 from Data Services, Ltd.
- A birthday card "to a beloved wife." Inside: *Dear Clare*. Nothing else. Unfinished, unsent.
- One day's worth of food journaling: *banana 70 cal, c&c protein 210 cal; pb protein 240 cal; ensure 250 x 2 = 500, total = 1270, tomorrow +++300*
- A note in his writing: *Mickey* → *boyfriend??*
- A receipt for two pairs of new reading glasses
- A pair of cracked and bent reading glasses
- Another note: *BH: 603-565-7309*
- A single green Post-it: *r/unsolved*

I take a break to call BH from my dad's cell phone.

A man answers. "Hello?"

"Hi," I say. "This is . . . Mark Angstrom's phone."

"Who is this?"

"Who is this?"

"Bill."

"Bill who?"

"Rooney."

I glance down at my dad's note and see that what I thought was an H was a sloppy R. The ink doesn't form a closed loop, but the paper is indented from pressure. "How did you know Mark?" I ask.

"We skipped a step here. Who is this?"

"Mark left a note with your number."

"Okay. And you are?"

“Why would he have done that?”

“You can go ahead and ask him.”

“Not really,” I say. “Mark’s dead.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah.” I feel myself losing my nerve. “I was going through

some of his things, and I saw this number, so I figured—”

“Clare?”

“What?”

“Sorry, is this Clare?”

“No,” I say. “Her daughter.”

“Angie?”

“Teddy.”

“Oh, right. Jesus. That makes sense. I don’t know why my mind went . . .” Bill lets his voice trail off.

“How do you know them?”

“I used to do your yard,” Bill says. “You probably don’t remember.”

A guy in his late twenties. His face is fuzzy, but I can see Angie clearly—taking a break from her failed efforts at backyard tanning to sneak around the side of the house and bum a smoke from him. Me, left to man the reflectors we made out of cardboard and aluminum foil, ready to flash a signal if Mom popped her head out of the sliding door. Both of us pudgy with puppy fat in the tiny bikinis we bought with our own allowance. It wasn’t that Mom didn’t approve of two-pieces; it was that she thought they required a certain figure. She didn’t want us looking like the fat tourists.

“I remember,” I say to Bill. “You drove a white pick-up.”

“Can I ask what happened?”

“Suicide.”

“How? I’m sorry, I know that’s not polite to ask.”

“He drove his car off the bridge by our house.”

“On purpose?”

“Yes, on purpose.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Why did he have your number written down?”

“I don’t know,” Bill says. “Maybe he needed some work done

in the yard or around the house.”

“Right. Maybe he wanted to make sure the gutters were cleaned before he offed himself.”

Bill misses my sarcasm. “Getting affairs in order, I think they call it.” He clears his throat, and I see him shirtless. I hear Angie in my head.

“Hot Landscaping Guy is here,” she says, leaping onto my top bunk, where the view of the driveway is better.

I protest: he’s not hot; he’s just tan and sweaty.

She’s such a mess of hormones that she can’t tell the difference.

She’s back to staring at Bill as he unloads the truck. “He only looks at you,” she says.

He does not. He doesn’t look at either of us. Also: he’s old.

But from that point on, I make a point to wear makeup on days that he comes by. I make a point to look and sound older than my fourteen years. To walk like my hips have already rounded, to sway.

“Hello?” Bill says. “Teddy?”

“I have to go,” I say. “Sorry.”

“I’m sorry about your dad.”

“Yeah, thanks,” I say.

As I go to end the call, I see that the tiny gray flip phone screen reads “bill” rather than the number that I manually entered. A saved contact.

“Hello,” I say, raising the phone back to my ear, but I only hear the dial tone.

I click through the contact list. There are only three. I'm not in here, nor my mom. Just "bill," "don't answer," and "ginger." I call "don't answer" and "ginger" but both are disconnected numbers. No ring, just an automated message letting me know that I've hit a dead end. The outgoing call log doesn't show anything past the calls I've made today; the incoming log is empty. I log onto Dad's computer as a guest so that I can google Bill Rooney. It's a common name, and I have to really dig to come up with anything relevant. Finally, I hit on my guy—William F. Rooney Landscaping in Brookdale, one town further inland. His business doesn't have a website, but he is on Yelp with one five-star review from someone named Jeremy P.

Love Bill and his team! Have been using WFR for years. Fair prices, on time, super reliable. Plus Bill plays a mean guitar!!!

I return to my search bar: *Bill+Rooney+guitar+Brookdale*
In the images tab, pictures of a local band come up. I click through to the website hosting them, and it's the homepage for the Shifty, a dive bar that I've been to once or twice with the other teachers for Friday happy hour. The events page informs me that Mondays are trivia, Tuesdays are two-for-one drinks, and Wednesdays are the standing performance date for the Marching Ants, Bill's band. There he is, fuzzy in the back of the frame, hiding behind the lead singer.

Wednesday. Tomorrow.

I write the time on my hand with Dad's pen, and I have to carve it into my skin, the ink is so dry.

"Teddy," Mom calls. "Wolfie needs to go out."

"Coming," I call. I close the computer and glance back at Dad's notes before I fold them in a square. *Mickey → boyfriend???*

The only Mickey I can think of is our neighbor's old dog, a Yorkie that barked incessantly at all hours of the night. He's dead now.

“Teddy!”

“Coming!”

I tuck the square of notes neatly into my pocket. I slip Dad’s cell phone in the other one. I leave the bag of trash and the laptop. One thing at a time.

At dinner, Mom and I make a game plan. I'm going to tackle the bills this weekend, when I have the time to sit on automated hold lines for hours. We'll clean out the room over the course of the next month. Hazmat stuff first. Notes and pills and correspondences later.

"I'll stay here while we're getting it all sorted," I say.

Mom nods and pretends to miss the subtext.

"This way I can move my stuff slowly to the new place. I won't have to get it all done at once."

"What?" Mom asks.

"Like this weekend, I'll probably take some of the boxes that I don't need right now. The kitchen stuff you said I could take and things like that."

"You're still going?"

"At the end of April, maybe," I say. "Not right now."

Mom tugs at her hair and stares at the side door. It's so dark outside, we can't see the yard, just the reflection of our own faces. I try to make eye contact with her in the glass, but she looks away.

"I signed a lease," I say. "We discussed this. Remember? You said you understood."

I know that if I stay, I'll never leave. There will never be a good time.

Mom nods. "Right," she says. "Well, good night, then." She kisses me hastily on the top of my head and proceeds upstairs.

After a few minutes of listening to her pace the creaky floors, I grab Dad's computer and a fresh bottle of wine and retreat to the basement, where everything except my bed and a pile of dirty clothes is boxed and bubble wrapped.

I try *r/unsolved* as the computer password, but that doesn't work, so I close the laptop and google it on my phone instead, and I come up with a Reddit page: *r/UnsolvedMysteries*. It bills itself as a "a subreddit dedicated to the unresolved mysteries of the world." At the top is the board's latest obsession: unsolved triple homicide in Indiana, where a mother, father, and son were all beaten to death in their farmhouse. The mother was pregnant.

I pour myself another glass and download the app for easier viewing. I let it generate a gibberish username and I scroll.

A girl was murdered in Ohio last month, and the police have no suspects in the case. She was found raped and mangled in her bed. Her mother, who discovered the body, is catatonic, institutionalized. When she comes down off the benzos, she tries to kill herself. Every time.

A woman—nineteen, a college student—went missing in California last year. Broad daylight, camera footage of a man picking her up and throwing—literally throwing—her five-foot frame in his trunk. Neither the man nor the car can be identified.

Two girls—friends—ten and eleven years old—were stabbed in the woods, walking home from school in rural Pennsylvania. One died. The other is in intensive care. There are no suspects. It's the third crime of its kind this year. The police don't know what to make of it.

There is a search feature at the top of the page. I know what will happen when I type my sister's name. I brace myself for the onslaught of men trading information, throwing around

detective show jargon, laying out their theories, linking to their YouTube channels and podcasts. Pining and fantasizing. Angie was cute in a punky way. I can see that now. All young people are cute. In the months after she disappeared, she attracted attention from a certain type, guys who were sick of all the blond sorority girls gone missing. They talked about her as though, if they helped rescue her, she might even date them.

What I'm not prepared for—what comes up first—are the posts about my dad. Of course, though. Of course, it's news here, on the very site he must have come to for this kind of update.

- **hop_on_Pop:** Angie Angstrom (remember her?)—her uncle/daddy Mark killed himself on the tenth anniversary of her death.
 - **lil-gerbil-baby:** No shit. Have we been at this that long?
 - **Anon34567:** LOL.

One of the users links to a separate subreddit—[r/AngieAngstrom](#). It has only 157 followers, but I still feel a perverse sense of pride, a thought I try to squash as fast as it pops up: *we're famous*.

Pinned at the top is a years-old summary of the case, upvoted thirty-three times.

For those unfamiliar with the case:

Angie Angstrom (18F), a high school senior, disappeared some time between Fri 3.11.05 and Sat 3.12.05. The night she disappeared, she attended a local party at the house of a school mate. She drank with friends and was apparently very intoxicated. Friends at

the party saw her arrive alone and leave alone (around midnight). She told some people that she was getting a ride home from her boyfriend, and it was confirmed by the family that Angie had not taken a car out of the house that night, though they didn't know about a boyfriend. The police questioned dozens of partygoers, confirming this version of events. Three were asked to take a polygraph (host, host's boyfriend, and a guest who was sober and remembered talking to Angie). Several people noted that she seemed "off," like she was on drugs.

Her younger sister, Theodora (16F), said that she saw Angie in the early hours of the morning at home. She claimed that Angie was not drunk/drugged. [Note: this information was late to come out—approx. five days into investigation. Police changed their focus at this point from the party to the Angstrom household given change of the last-seen location.]

Morning of 3.12, Angie was not in the house. Her mother, Clare Angstrom (52F) called in missing persons at 7:30 p.m. No evidence of a struggle was found in the house or car. No one from the party had heard from her after she left. Other students say she had a cell phone (burner type/disposable), but she wasn't on her parents' plan, and a cell phone was never discovered.

Angie's erratic uncle/stepfather (51M) quickly became a target for police. Clare vouched for him, but he has a strange history (look him up: Mark Angstrom). Angie's journal entries, which were leaked to the press, painted a picture of domestic turmoil as well.

Her case remains unsolved.

What do you all think?

The top comments are a glut of conspiracy:

- **cornelonthecob09:** The burner phone to me points to a runaway situation. Things were not good at home (per diaries). Angie knew if she left with her car, she'd be found, so she had her boyfriend pick her up from a place other than her house, created a lot of confusion by acting drugged up, pointed police in direction of a murder and blew town. Smart.
 - **quad_cat:** Ever heard of Occam's razor? It's the dad. That guy's a fucking psycho. Who marries their brother's widow?
 - **FFR30000:** Don't forget "leaves his real kid behind."
 - **SVUfan531:** See I think the kids at that party always seemed shady. Something not right there. They lawyered up so fast.
 - **whatever-grl:** What about the sister IDing her at home later that night?
 - **cornelonthecob09:** I don't put much stock in that. So late in the game. She just wanted attention.
- **SVUfan531:** ANOTHER VOTE FOR DAD DID IT.
 - **FFR30000:** Did you guys see that guy on the news? He was in a full-blown sweat all the time. guiltyyyyy
 - **whatever-grl:** What's with the burner then?
 - **FFR30000:** Teenage shit?
 - **whatever-grl:** Walter White shit. You know teenagers with burners?

- **medicalemergency:** What burner?
Everyone on this sub acts like the phone is real, but there WAS. NO. PHONE.
- **hop_on_Pop:** At one point, I thought definite runaway, but then when she stayed missing . . . the dad did it.
 - **homicideunit4:** Why?
 - **hop_on_Pop:** Why not?
 - **homicideunit4:** could be a straight kidnapping. Drifter etc.
- **homicideunit4:** I always felt that they never explored the boyfriend angle enough. I followed the case closely when it was everywhere around here. She told everyone she had a boyfriend, the burner points to a boyfriend . . . and yet no boyfriend ever turned up.
 - **SVUfan531:** Exactly!!! “no boyfriend ever turned up”

I change the sorting feature from “Top” to “New” and the posts shuffle into a different order. The two most recent entries are from MICHAELA345 and bear zero votes. Three months ago, this person wished Angie a happy twenty-eighth birthday. Last week, he wrote simply: *RIP MARK ANGSTROM*. No one responded.

I reply. *He was a good dad. Miss you xx*

Fifteen minutes later, when I go back to delete it, my buzz fading fast and embarrassment setting in, realizing that it could fuel speculation that Angie is out there, reading and responding to the Redditors themselves, I see Michael has already replied to my post:

theodora?

The sight of my name on the screen floods my bloodstream with adrenaline. I throw my phone to the foot of my bed instinctively. Without its light, the room goes dark. I don't move. I hold my breath. I blink repeatedly to lose the afterglow of the screen, so that I might regain my ability to see in the dark, but I remain blind. Blind and overwhelmed by the sensation of being watched from a close distance.

THE
FELLOWSHIP
OF



PUZZLE
MAKERS

A novel

SAMUEL BURR



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2024 by Samuel Burr

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Doubleday, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, and distributed in Canada by Penguin Random House Canada Limited, Toronto.

www.doubleday.com

DOUBLEDAY and the portrayal of an anchor with a dolphin are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Jacket design by Andrew Davis

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

[Names: Burr, Samuel, [date] author.

Title: The Fellowship of Puzzlemakers : a novel / Samuel Burr.

Description: First edition. | New York : Doubleday, 2024. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2023045514 (print) | LCCN 2023045515 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780593470091 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593470107 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Cryptologic fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PR6102.U7637 F45 2024 (print) |

LCC PR6102.U7637 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20231005

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023045514>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023045515>

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First Edition

PROLOGUE

1991

LTARDBT ID IWT UTAADLHWXE DU EJOATBPZTGH!

The shiny brass plaque affixed to the front door was plain gobbledygook to some, but for many who visited this grand house on the outskirts of Bedfordshire, and certainly for the people who resided here, it made perfect sense. It was a basic +11 Caesar shift. Nothing too fiendish at all:

WELCOME TO THE FELLOWSHIP OF PUZZLEMAKERS!

Beneath it, a laminated slip of paper read: *Our buzzer is playing up. Press and hold it, else it sounds like Morse code. Better still, try the knocker. One of us is usually in. No junk mail, please!*

Pippa Allsbrook stood with her back to the house and felt her entire weight collapse against the arched oaken door. She'd pulled it shut the moment she'd stepped outside and clocked the peculiar delivery on the front steps, which had appeared almost out of thin air.

A hatbox.

It looked just like any other with its black leather exterior, gold trim and the letters H.H. embossed in gold on the hexagonal lid. But it was the contents, or more specifically the *noise* coming from the thing, which really confounded her: an insistently high-pitched, piercing sound that, up close, really couldn't be confused with anything else at all.

As Pippa removed the lid—which had been left deliberately unsecured—she was so overcome her legs started to buckle. She reached for the pillar of the porch to steady herself and folded

her spare hand against her pounding chest, stealing another glimpse inside.

Surely not.

Tucked inside the flowery paper lining of the box, a beautiful little baby, presumably no more than a few days old, was swaddled in a custard yellow blanket, crying its heart out.

“Oh, my darling. Where the devil have you come from?”

The boy’s squalling briefly tempered as Pippa peered down at him, their eyes meeting.

“Aren’t you just the most *beautiful* little thing?”

She wasn’t used to throwing out such airy blandishments, but the tiny little person looking up at her—a boy if the blue of his romper suit was anything to go by—was perfect in every way imaginable. He had golden wisps of hair whipped on his head like spun sugar, cheeks as plump as a pudding and the palest blue eyes, so piercing they seemed to penetrate her own.

Pippa gathered up her tweed skirt and crouched down on the steps. She reached gingerly inside the box.

First, she wiped away the silvery trail of tears, then she stroked her thumb along the tiny boy’s nose, before bopping it once, twice, three times, as if checking he were real, that this wasn’t all a dream.

“Boop!” she heard herself say, in a light, sing-song voice. “Boop . . . boop . . . boop!”

The baby—soothed by the gesture—went very still for a moment.

She looked at him. He looked at her. She felt his tiny hands curl around her finger before his flailing arms suddenly shot upwards.

He was reaching out for her.

She tucked one hand carefully under his head and the other beneath his back without hesitating and hoisted him out of the box. “Shh, now,” she whispered gently in his ear. “I’ve got you . . . I’ve got you.”

He was so unbearably soft she couldn’t help but press their two faces together. With his velvety skin brushing against hers,

Pippa issued a breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding. She kissed him on the head, his nose, the tiny dimple of his chin. He smelled like the inside of a milk bottle, of freshly baked bread, and Imperial Leather.

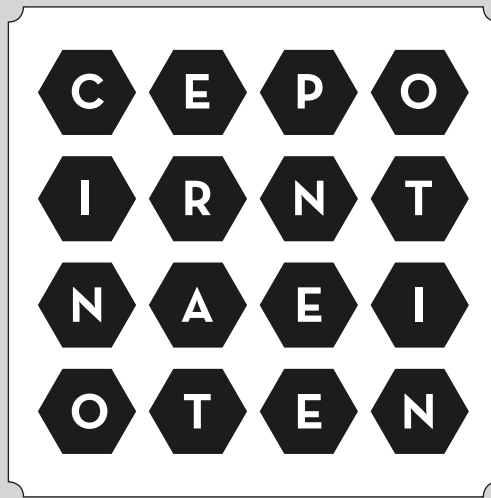
It was only when she nestled the baby boy into the crook of her arm that she caught it. There, in the dense shrubbery either side of the long gravel drive, was a definite flash of something ahead of her. A scampering. It wasn't the faint scuttle of an animal, nor the wind rustling the branches, but a human movement somewhere in the distance. She was certain of it. Someone was out there. Someone was watching.

Step forward, she wanted to say. *Why are you leaving this baby with us?* But just then, the baby's tiny little fist reached out and wrapped around her middle finger and she knew in that moment that their fates were sealed.

"That's it," she murmured soothingly, gently rocking the boy from side to side in the dappled morning light. Their two pulses were beginning to settle into each other. "You're safe now."

For Pippa Allsbrook, in all her sixty-seven years on this earth, there had never been a moment as miraculous, nor utterly fated, as this one. It was the solution she'd spent a lifetime searching for. The missing piece.

PART ONE



Chapter One

2016

Clayton Stumper was an enigma.

He always had been, and, now, standing just a few metres away from Pippa's open coffin on the eve of her funeral, he feared he always would be.

He could barely bring himself to look.

From the other side of the old billiard room, he caught a glimpse of her hair, a silver cloud of perfectly coiled perm, and clocked the padded shoulders of her favourite Givenchy dress protruding from the long pine box, which was lined with pink velvet and adorned with a bright display of purple and white gerberas. She had asked for the floral tribute on her coffin not to read *MOTHER* or *FRIEND* or *PRESIDENT* but *TSILABREVICURC*.

It had taken some explaining at the florist, but that was what she had requested, and Clayton was determined to follow her instructions. She was still challenging her friends even from beyond the grave.

The wake was being hosted in the largest and most formal room at the Fellowship of Puzzlemakers. There were mottled brass candelabras affixed to William Morris walls and, along the long end of the room, two bay windows, encased with elaborate tasselled draperies, looking out over the parterre. Over the years, this was where the Fellowship had hosted all their formal events—puzzle tournaments, special lectures, product launches—but now the space looked more like the communal lounge of a nursing home. Where there was once immaculate decorative baroque furniture there were now reclining winged armchairs, jigsaw tables and crossword-setting boards, all angled towards the early evening.

Guests weren't due for another hour, so Clayton had come to spend some time with Pippa. He didn't like the idea of her being on her own. But instead of going straight over and keeping her company, he found himself hovering at a distance, trying to pluck up the courage.

All week he'd been putting on a brave face, pretending he was just fine, when really the bottom of his world had fallen out and he didn't know where to turn.

It had started around the time Pippa had fallen ill. A new impulse had started to consume him: a compulsion to find out the truth. To discover exactly where he came from, who his biological birthparents were and why they'd chosen to leave him here, on the steps of the Fellowship, twenty-five years ago. It hadn't felt as urgent before—he'd always had everything he needed here, had never gone without—but the moment he'd realised that Pippa, the woman who raised him as her own, wasn't going to live forever, Clayton had started to feel untethered.

He distracted himself by sorting through the games cabinet in the corner of the room. This glass repository was where they kept their various puzzling consumables: compendiums, counters, marbles and ball bearings. Even though he'd stuck a notice on the door asking residents to return the items where they'd found them, nothing was ever in the correct place.

Beside this cluttered cabinet was a green-felt-lined mah-jong table, and next to that an enormous freestanding blackboard, which, if examined in the correct light and from the right angle, revealed half a century's worth of chalked inscriptions: riddles and nonograms, patterns and grids. The faint scribbles of some of the sharpest, most brilliant minds in all the British Isles.

Clayton cleared his throat, tried to say *hello* to her, but couldn't quite manage it.

The room was so unbearably quiet.

The only noise was of the colossal grandfather clock opposite, its swinging pendulum emitting a faint but authoritative *tick, tick, tick*. Clayton tried to block it out. He didn't need to be reminded of the time, and how little was left for everyone here at the Fellowship.

If only he could press pause, he thought, keep things exactly as they were forever.

As he reached the foot of the coffin, he took his first proper look at the woman inside.

Pippa Allsbrook.

The pioneering cruciverbalist. The polymath. President of the Fellowship of Puzzlemakers and Chairwoman of the British Crossword League.

Clayton had to admit, even in death she looked quite spectacular. At the foot of the coffin were some of her most treasured personal effects: her favourite pearl-plated compact mirror, a battered, leather-bound copy of Sam Loyd's *Cyclopedia of Puzzles*, and a bottle of her favourite Dom Pérignon, which she always kept a case of in the back of her wardrobe, ready to pop at special occasions.

She was eighty-nine at the end, as everyone kept reminding him. *We shouldn't mourn, we should celebrate. What a life, what a legacy!* Of course, that was all true, but . . . for Clayton, it didn't make her loss any less devastating.

He gripped the edge of the coffin and, before he could change his mind, leaned over so he was just inches from Pippa's face.

"Hey, Pip . . ."

Silence.

"It's only me."

Her waxen skin wasn't just pale but watery, almost see-through, like a sheet of gelatine. He could count the creases that sprang from the corner of her eyes like a sunburst, could see how the funeral directors had rouged her hollow cheeks, lined her lips, painted her eyelids—a darker shade than she would usually wear.

It took every effort to raise his other hand and reach inside the coffin properly, lifting Pippa's frail wrist folded across her lap and inserting his hand gently under hers, but when he did, the weight of it lying on top of his, the coolness of it, felt familiar to him. It warmed him somehow.

Before he turned to leave, Clayton reached into his back pocket and took out that day's *Times* crossword (No. 27,122), slipping it inside the velvet lining near her feet. He'd considered having a go at filling it in but couldn't quite bring himself. The grief had left him groggy and, even at the best of times, the cryptics were usually beyond him.

He was not a puzzlemaker himself, of course. Unlike everyone else, he hadn't chosen to live here; he had been gifted to the Fellowship by someone. There were so many questions now, so many things he'd wished he had quizzed Pippa on, but it was all too late for that.

Just like the unsolved grid he had just slipped inside the coffin, he was never going to get the answers he needed to fill himself in. To make himself complete.

Chapter Two

Downstairs

The Old Queen's Head, Islington

TUESDAY, 7TH AUGUST, 1979

Pippa was dying for something bubbly.

Standing at the bar, she tried to catch the eye of the young barmaid who had a perfect swirl of platinum blonde hair on her head like ice cream on top of a cone. The woman was wearing the largest gold hoop earrings she had surely ever seen; three in each ear, they chimed like tiny church bells as she shambled up and down the line doing an excellent job of ignoring Pippa's expectant gaze.

"Next!" the lady barked, looking straight past Pippa to the handsome young man who'd just appeared behind her. "What can I get you, my darlin'?"

Pippa sighed and tipped her head to the ceiling in despair as the man stepped round her.

Ever since she'd hit the half-century, Pippa was beginning to feel as if she were a figment of her own imagination. She was becoming invisible to the world.

"May I order a drink, please?" she asked. "I can see you're busy, but I've been waiting a little while now."

"Be with you in a sec, doll," the woman responded, without even glancing up from the pump.

Pippa took a deep breath.

For the past ten minutes she had been keeping an anxious eye on the mirrored section of the bar in front of her. The door leading to the upstairs lounge was reflected in the space between a bottle of Bombay Dry and Bell's. She'd caught at least ten

people slipping through while she'd been waiting to be served. Each time, relief had flooded through her. Despite the initial wave of interest, she was worried about whether people would actually show their faces. That was the trouble with puzzledom—it did rather attract the introverted types.

UPSTAIRS FUNCTION ROOM
RESERVED FOR PRIVATE BOOKING.
7–TILL LAST ORDERS.

A landlord suddenly appeared beside the barmaid: a portly chap with a swollen gut like a giant marble, so perfectly contained, it appeared as if it might shoot down and pop out one of his trouser legs if he sneezed.

Pippa tried to catch his eye, lifting herself up on tiptoes to make herself even taller but he was focused on emptying a bag of halfpennies into the cashier tray, whistling the theme to *Ski Sunday*.

If I stood on this bar in just my undergarments, she wondered. If I removed every stitch of clothing, or, better still, dressed as a man, with a fake moustache and bowler hat, perhaps then I might get a bloody drink.

The only person who had acknowledged her presence was an older gentleman a few bar stools down.

He was immaculately dressed in a grey double-breasted pinstripe suit and a brown felt fedora hat, and was carrying a battered leather briefcase, pipe and paper. She'd been watching him out of the corner of her eye, plucking coins from a leather purse and lining them up along the bar as if preparing to play backgammon.

He ordered himself a barley wine and a packet of dry-roasted peanuts, the exact money—fifty-nine pennies—already counted out in front of him.

She couldn't quite place him but was certain she recognised him from somewhere. His cologne—an assault of exotic spices

and woods—seemed familiar too. It was Fabergé Brut. The same scent that Melvyn Prado-Lee, an editor she'd assisted at the *Telegraph*, would spritz himself liberally with, usually after heading out for a lunch meeting and coming back smelling of his mistress.

She'd been twenty-one years old, fresh out of Cambridge University with great prospects and even greater aspirations when she'd first met Melvyn—a man she would go on to encounter many times in her life—and she had yet to come across anyone she loathed more. She'd anagrammed his name once—something she liked to do when someone provoked a strong reaction in her. Some of her favourites over the years:

Eric Clapton. *Narcoleptic*.

Clint Eastwood. *Old West Action*.

Margaret Thatcher. *That Great Charmer*.

For Melvyn Prado-Lee, she'd conjured *Pervy Old Man Eel*. Couldn't have been more apt.

The old fellow beside her lifted his barley wine from the bar, and in doing so revealed a small blue badge pinned to his lapel. A globe emblem wrapped in a laurel wreath, topped with the Crown jewels and the letters *GCHQ*. She knew it was an honorary badge that the top-secret intelligence organisation gave to all retired personnel, which meant that its owner was none other than Sir Derek Wadlow, the legendary codebreaker and international chess master himself. She had been to a cryptology lecture he gave at the Savile Club years ago. He was part of the team that cracked the Enigma machine at Bletchley Park.

Derek—now surely in his mid-eighties—tramped away from the bar, shuffling at an inordinately slow pace, as if he had dropped something very small and was scanning the ground for it. When he eventually reached the back of the pub, he slipped through the door leading to the function room upstairs.

Pippa couldn't quite believe it.

Sir Derek Wadlow wanted to join her puzzle club? He was a veteran of Bletchley Park, a man who'd helped decipher enemy code, surely one of the most acclaimed cryptologists in

Britain, perhaps even in the world. What a coup, what a terrific endorsement, and before they'd even got going, too.

The ambition behind her society was simple: to bring together like-minded puzzlers—cruciverbalists, enigmatologists, logicians, trivialists, riddlers—for a regular meet-up in the pub. Not just professionals, for they were few and far between—but enthusiastic amateurs, anyone who revelled in, and had the mental capacity for, fiendish games and challenges.

Ever since she'd become a professional compiler, Pippa had developed quite a following. Or at least the alter-ego she'd created for herself had. These days, there were dozens who would write to *Squire of Highbury Hill, London*, enclosing clippings of grids torn from the paper, marked with start and end times to show their varied competency. Sometimes they'd even post hand-drawn puzzles of their own with cryptic clues for her to appraise, enclosing stamped-addressed envelopes for her to autograph their work, like a royal seal of approval.

A few weeks ago, she had posted out a dozen invitations to a select circle of celebrated puzzlers to join the inaugural meeting of the society. She'd encouraged them all to share the word with their own contacts—everyone was welcome, she had insisted. Or rather, *Squire of Highbury Hill* had insisted.

Murray Salter—the crossword editor at the *Express*—responded by return, promising to circulate the details to all his freelance compilers; Clement Banks—UK Scrabble League Champion 1967–1972—said he'd be sure to get the details printed in the programme of the next tournament he was in. Before long the invite had made it into periodicals and journals across the country and the RSVPs were flooding in.

“Have you seen all the oddballs heading upstairs?” Pippa heard the barmaid mutter to the landlord. “Who did you say they were?”

The landlord shrugged. “I just take the bookings, Pam.”

Pippa coughed lightly into her fist.

“But they've got a name, haven't they?” the barmaid went on, oblivious. “The Federation of something or other.”

Give me strength, Pippa thought. Or a glass of Asti Spumante at the very least.

“And did you see that old boy counting out his coins just now?” the barmaid continued. “Looks like he’d been saving up for weeks.”

He’s a millionaire, Pippa wanted to say. The man is a multimillionaire because he helped saved this country with his brain. One of his little toes is cleverer than you two twerps put together.

The landlord was squinting at the bookings sheet he’d lifted from beside the till. “The Fellow . . . Ship . . . Of . . . Hang on, I need my readers.”

“The Fellowship of Puzzlemakers,” Pippa snapped, and the two of them turned to regard her.

Suddenly they saw her. She gave a flash of her hand as if to say hello, here I am.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“The Fellowship of Puzzlemakers,” she reiterated. “It’s my society. It’s our inaugural session. And it starts . . .” She glanced at her wristwatch. “In two and a half minutes. Now, could I *please* trouble you for a glass of something? I really ought to shake a leg and get up there.”

Pippa unclipped her bag and pulled out her purse. She hated to be ignored, worse still to be ridiculed, but it was her nerves that were also getting the better of her.

“I didn’t mean no offence nor nothing,” the barmaid said. “We usually have darts on Tuesdays, that’s all.”

“This one’s on the house, ma’am—”

“*Miss . . . please,*” Pippa corrected before she could stop herself. “And that’s very kind. Do you have anything sparkling?”

The barmaid lifted her soda gun and pointed it at her. “I’ve got tonic or soda. Whatcha fancy?”

Moments later, steeling herself at the foot of the narrow-carpeted staircase, clutching a complimentary Campari and soda she didn’t really fancy, Pippa Allsbrook lifted her flannel skirt and ploughed her way up the stairs and into the next chapter of her life.



DAUGHTERS

OF

SHANDONG

A NOVEL

EVE J. CHUNG

BERKLEY

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

penguinrandomhouse.com

[Insert Penguin logo]

Copyright © 2024 by Angela Chung

Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

BERKLEY and the BERKLEY & B colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

Map by [TK]

ISBN: 9780593640531

An application to register this book for cataloging has been submitted to the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

Book design by

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Lucky

Early next morning, we packed all of our flatbread, wrapped in clean clothing, and a few canteens of water and the remainder of our personal belongings. We had so little that it all fit easily in the wheelbarrow, along with a compass from Mr. Hu and some boiled eggs from Mrs. Zhang. The dawn sky blushed, casting a soft pink light on the map as I opened it. Old creases lined the paper, which was faded from the repeated touch of travelers before us. Mr. Zhang knew the roads well, and I added his advice in notes in the margins. It was about one hundred fifty kilometers to Qingdao; there was no bridge across Jiaozhou Bay, so we had to go all the way around the coast. That would be the easy part, since we could follow the beach, with the ocean on our right. The challenge lay in navigating the small country lanes without getting lost—we wanted to avoid the main roads, which would have more checkpoints.

Closing the door to the shed, we waved to the donkey, who blinked and chewed his hay. The chickens were similarly unaffected by our departure. Mr. Zhang's dog, however, whined when he saw us packing. We had spent a lot of time with the dog, especially on the colder nights, when he would scratch the door to come into the shed. In the weeks after the rally, he lay beside me, the only company that I could accept as I remained motionless on the wooden platform. When we had asked Mr. Zhang about his name, he said it was just "Dog." He had only one, so he didn't need to differentiate. Dog was a mountain mutt, with wiry brown fur and pointed ears, a broad chest and short, muscular legs. He learned commands without being formally trained and could even catch rats and rabbits. I was going to miss him dearly.

Mom got on her knees and bowed to Mr. and Mrs. Zhang to express her gratitude for their kindness and the risks that they had taken. If asked about our departure, they would say that after deep self-reflection, they realized they could not be affiliated with class enemies and had kicked us out into the streets. I prayed

that no harm would come to them as a result of their goodwill toward us.

Lan rode on Mom's back and Di walked beside her, while I pushed the wheelbarrow, looping its straps onto my shoulders. It was heavy, but Mr. Zhang had oiled the wheel and it rolled smoothly—much better than the night before.

As we ambled away, we heard footsteps trotting behind us. It was Dog!

“Go,” I commanded, forcing a harsh tone. We had stolen so many of the Zhangs' eggs; we certainly couldn't steal their dog too. “Go back home!”

“Don't worry about him,” said Mr. Zhang, waving his hand. “He'll get bored or hungry and he will turn back.”

So off we went, with Dog escorting us through the town's mostly empty streets.

Mr. Zhang was right about many things, but he was wrong about Dog. Dog did not turn back, even as we passed the crumbling stone gate of Zhucheng and the limits of the village. Dog did not turn back as we cut into the fields, away from the main road. Dog stayed with us even as we stopped by a tranquil silver creek to rest and eat flatbread. He drank some water and lay down beside us, panting happily, and jumped back on his paws when we were ready to continue.

We walked slowly, since the wheelbarrow was heavy and the small roads were uneven. Occasionally the wheel got stuck in a hole, and the three of us had to throw our weight against the wheelbarrow to send it bouncing out with a jerk, our belongings flipping into the air. The straps distributed the load along my shoulders and back, but my palms chafed from directing the handles over the bumpy ground. When Di and I switched, weeping blisters had erupted along my shoulders and hands. Learning from my own mistake, I took some rags and wrapped them around Di's palms for protection.

Mid-April had arrived, but though the snow was gone, the air was still cold. Winter jasmine, the flowers that welcome spring, had burst defiantly along the road, radiant yellow petals like droplets of light. The landscape was mostly deforested, but in a few areas the locals had planted cherry trees, their shy blossoms peeking out from green buds. In the breeze, they shivered as though they were underdressed for their game of hide-and-seek. I focused on their beauty, hoping to draw any joy that could sustain my body,

which felt like it was on the verge of breaking. Though I had tried to prepare, the walks I took in Zhucheng were woefully insufficient. Even with our sluggish pace, the journey was shin splintering, spine shattering. Mom never complained, but her gait became more lopsided as she began to limp from pain, wincing with each step.

By the time we found a place to settle for the evening, Di looked ready to burst into tears. Our water was gone and our throats were dry, but we didn't have the willpower to search for a stream. Together we pushed the wheelbarrow off the path and settled between some shrubs with long, willowy branches that we could hide behind. My feet were throbbing, and my shoes were so worn that I could feel every pebble and twig against my soles. Mom collapsed on the damp earth, eyes closed as she was momentarily overwhelmed by exhaustion. I lay on the ground, hoping in vain that I could absorb the soil's water through my skin and slake my thirst.

When we could summon up the energy, we gathered some sticks and lay our blankets down on top of them, improvising bedding for the night. Dog still had not turned back.

"I guess he is our dog now," said Di.

I should have felt guilty, but I couldn't help but rejoice at this unexpected gift. Leaning against Dog, I closed my eyes, feeling safer with his presence.

Mom broke off a piece of flatbread and tossed it to him. "At least you aren't a useless mouth to feed," she said. "You can warn us if someone is coming."

"He can catch rabbits too," I added.

"That's true," said Mom. "You are probably more useful than all of us if you can get meat!"

Since Dog was now part of our family, we had to give him a proper name. "Our family finally has a son," Di joked. We couldn't call him Little Brother, because that was essentially Di's name. So we settled on the name Lucky, because there is a Chinese saying that goes, *With dogs come luck—go lai fu*—which we hoped to invoke with Dog's new name.

"Do you like your new name?" I asked. "Will you be a good dog and bring us luck?" The newly named Lucky wagged his tail and settled with his head on my lap.

In the morning, the pale sunlight filtering through my eyelids drew me from slumber, but waking up was its own nightmare. I felt as though I had gotten into a fight with Mr. Zhang's donkey, and lost. My body screamed as though I had been kicked repeatedly in my sleep, and then run over by jagged wagon wheels. As I forced myself to rise, there was a chorus of popping from my joints as my muscles resisted every movement. Mom and Di were also miserable, and Mom's feet were so swollen that they bulged from her shoes. Only Lan seemed refreshed, having slept warmly, curled up in a nest of our clothing in the wheelbarrow.

Undeterred, Mom unfolded the map and examined it. "I'm pretty sure we are somewhere along here," she said, pointing between two villages that I had never heard of. "I think we probably walked about ten kilometers yesterday. We need to do more today."

"My legs are killing me," Di whined, massaging her calves.

"Have some flatbread," Mom replied stoically. "We need to walk again, faster and for longer if possible. We can take breaks, but we cannot lag. There are dangers on the road, so the sooner we can get off of it, the better."

"I'll carry Lan," I offered, seeing Mom rub her lower back. It wasn't safe to put Lan in the wheelbarrow, especially with the bumpy terrain. "You need a break too, Mom."

Mom smiled gratefully. "I will carry Lan for our first shift, and then we can switch."

Like donkeys, we plodded slowly along the paths, occasionally getting onto the main streets, when the side roads disappeared. The big roads allowed us to beg for water and check where we were, since there would be an occasional sign or other travelers. Qingdao was such a major city that almost anyone could point us in the right direction. We passed a few small towns, which Mom matched with the names on our map to keep our bearings, while the compass reassured us that we were moving eastward.

Whenever we saw cadres in uniform I froze, even though they ignored us, assuming that we were ordinary villagers. There were others like us, with wheelbarrows, farmers who carried tools, fertilizer, and bags full of seeds. Wheat fields around us had sprouted, and in a few months would become golden blond. Here in the North wheat grew like a weed, erupting from the ground every spring and standing tall and

proud by early summer. As we passed these young plants, I longed to lie down and let them grow around me, over me, shielding me from the grueling kilometers ahead.

Early in the morning on our fourth day of walking, two cadres on sleek brown horses stopped us on the road. I had carried Lan for the past hour, and she felt like a boulder on my back. As the cadres trotted toward us I contemplated running, but Mom stood firm. With Lan's extra weight and my weak knees, I doubted that my body could withstand the impact of a sprint anyway.

"Good morning," said one of the cadres, dismounting swiftly from his horse. His leather boots were high quality, with silver buckles, but dusty from the road. "Where are you going?"

"To Qingdao," Mom replied, adjusting the wheelbarrow straps on her shoulders. "With my daughters."

The cadre raised his eyebrow, his hand tight on the horse's reins. "That's quite far. What business do you have there?"

"My husband's employer is selling tea," Mom explained. "We stayed with my mother-in-law to help her during the winter, and now we are going back home."

"What is your surname?" asked the cadre who was still mounted. His horse had slender legs and a shiny coat, so elegant that it looked out of place on this bleak little road. Perhaps it was a prized animal confiscated from a landlord somewhere.

"Zhang," Mom answered. She was so quick to come up with these responses, like she was sparring with words, blocking each attempt of her opponent to uncover the truth.

"Do you have a travel permit?" the one standing before us asked.

I forced myself to smile because I was scared then. *They're going to know. They'll send us back. They're on horses—there is no way we can outrun them!* Sensing my anxiety, Lucky placed himself between me and the cadres, his ears back and his tail out straight. His stance made both horses nervous, the whites of their eyes showing as they stared at him.

Reaching into her front pocket, Mom plucked out the forged travel permit, and handed it over. What had I written? *Zhucheng Communist Party*? Should I have written *Communist Party*, without specifying the city?

The cadre unfolded the paper and examined it, and then passed it up to his partner, who nodded. “Where did you come from?” asked the one on the horse.

Relief coursed through me as I realized that they were illiterate—our hometown was written so clearly on the paper.

“Zhucheng,” Mom replied.

“That’s also quite far! Are you just traveling by foot?”

Laughing, Mom said, “Of course! How else would we go? We don’t have money for horses!” Three disheveled women and a baby. Instead of a wagon we had a wheelbarrow; instead of a Pekingese, we had a mountain mutt. There was no way they would suspect that we were associated with gentry or landlords.

“Go ahead,” said the first cadre, grabbing his horse’s saddle and swinging his leg easily over it. “Take the main road—it’s a lot faster.” He pointed to a juncture where we could pass onto it.

“Thank you,” said Mom as I grinned and glanced at Di, who hadn’t seemed nervous at all. “I was looking for it—we got a bit lost.”

“You are welcome!” Both cadres smiled warmly and waved to us as they continued on their path. “Travel safely!”

10

Jiaozhou Bay

With the spring came weeds and small plants that we could eat. *Jicai*, a wild vegetable, sprouted all along the sides of one of the paths that we came across. We plucked it by the handful, roots and all in our haste, and piled our leafy bounty onto our wheelbarrow to wash when we reached a river. Neither Di nor I loved

vegetables, and traditionally we never ate them raw and cold. However, a long winter with only the occasional pickled cabbage or piece of salted meat whetted our appetite for the fragrant, juicy crunch of fresh-picked *jicai*, which tasted like the essence of spring—and hope—in a mouthful.

I had worn through my shoes completely after more than a week of walking, so Mom took some rags and wrapped my feet. Pain became our constant companion, radiating from our fingers as we clutched the wheelbarrow handles, and through our hips, down our legs, and into every toe. Blood seeped through our shoes—or rags, in my case—and oozed out of wounds on our shoulders where the wheelbarrow straps had taken off our skin. Despite Mom’s aspirations, we had to slow our pace—but we didn’t stop. Each day, we were like dutiful soldiers, marching toward our goal, the walk itself our battle.

At my worst times, I reminded myself that no matter how much my legs burned, it was better than the searing pain from my knees digging into the ice at Wildflower Field. Whenever I wanted to open my mouth and tell Mom I was tired, I thought about Comrade Cheng and found it within me to take just one more step. Step by step, breath by breath, we made our way out of the rugged mountain terrain, through fields, and finally to the sea.

Before we saw the ocean, Mom could smell it. She breathed deeply, as though she were inhaling a faint perfume, a scent that she wanted to absorb into her being. It was Mom who told me that memories are often embedded in smells, and through our noses we can unlock things long forgotten.

“What does it smell like?” I asked her.

“Home,” she replied, smiling. She looked radiant, the happiest that I had seen her in a long time, despite the welts on her shoulders and the wounds on her feet. I wasn’t sure if by “home” she meant that we were closer to our home in Qingdao, or to possibly finding my father—or if she meant her childhood home by the sea. I didn’t ask her. I wanted to let her continue that moment, to savor the sweet euphoria of making it this far.

As we got closer to the sea, I detected a hint of salt in the air. There in the horizon, we saw it—Jiaozhou Bay, a glittering aquamarine expanse, like an infinite roll of shining blue silk undulating in the wind. Di’s mouth fell open into a smile so wide that I could count her teeth. As we marveled at the magnificence of

the ocean, I had a newfound appreciation for my namesake—my name, Hai, means “ocean,” and until now I had never understood just how precious it was to Mom.

Along the bay, the towns were bigger, and there were more cadres. We had to present our travel permit three more times. I grew better at keeping my composure, and Mom made her same standard responses. As with the first pair of cadres, I suspected that none of these road guards were literate. They saw the big red stamp and waved us through, even offering helpful suggestions on which roads to take.

Mao had told his followers, “We Communists are like seeds and the people are like the soil. Wherever we go, we must unite with the people, take root, and blossom among them.” Perhaps this was the kindness that the Zhangs and other peasants were referring to. As we met more cadres on the roads through the countryside and by the sea, I found it hard to believe that these were the same Communists who had evicted us, slaughtered my family members, and nearly killed me.

One cadre, a thin man with a round face and large eyes, saw the rags on my feet and stopped us. With a soft smile, he bundled some straw and grass to stabilize my rag shoes. “I had to do this all the time when I was a boy,” he told me as he tied straw straps around my ankles. He reached into his pocket and took out a few bills—Communist Party printed notes—and gave them to Mom. “Buy something nice for the girls to eat,” he said. We had no idea how much they were worth, but we were grateful to get any money at all, and thanked him profusely.

I thought Mom would save the money, but that night we went to a market with the bills in hand. “Let’s see what we can afford,” Mom said, eyes twinkling. There were some small food stands out in the open, where each vendor usually specialized in one or a few items, advertised in bold writing on colorful wooden signs. Mom parked us, wheelbarrow and all, at a small table with red stools, while she talked to a potbellied vendor with gray hair.

Just the aroma was intoxicating, and I felt drunk as I perched on my seat. These outdoor markets often were dirty because of the food waste and lack of coordinated cleanup, but my hungry nose could pick out only the nice smells—of fried garlic, stewed meat, dried shrimp, and freshly chopped scallions. The satisfying sizzle of onions tossed in smoking-hot oil tickled my ears, and I had to keep my mouth clamped

shut to prevent myself from drooling.

Mom plopped down between Di and me, beaming. “We’ve made it so far, and who knows what lies ahead? No matter what happens, let’s at least have some enjoyment.” What she didn’t say, but I understood, was that we still didn’t know if we would make it to Qingdao. If the Communists discovered that our travel permit was fake, then it would be not only the end of our journey, but also the end of our lives. We might as well have something to savor before then!

The vendor came to our table with a big, steaming bowl of fish soup. It was made with a whole fish, a type of sea bream, the soup thick and creamy from the protein in the bones and skin. Potato starch noodles, a few clams, seaweed knots, chunks of ginger, and thick slices of scallion were also in the mix. With a clatter, he set out some small bowls, spoons, and chopsticks. It had been a while since we’d had clean utensils to eat with. Picking the dirt from my fingernails, I wiped my hands as best I could on my pants and brandished my chopsticks like a weapon.

Together, we launched ourselves into this feast. Mom scooped out the fish eyes and gave one to Di and one to me. She took out the brain and fed it to Lan, then sucked on the skull to get any remnants. We peeled off strips of fish skin and slurped them up with the noodles, stuffing our mouths with juicy white hunks of meat. Starved for fat, we swallowed every single drop and morsel, even chewing on the ginger to get as much of the broth as we could. There was no conversation, just pure dedication to the food in front of us. We ate noisily, tossing bones and other scraps to Lucky, who crunched through them eagerly.

The vendor came to us again, and at first I thought he was going to chide us for eating like barbarians. Instead, he held a plate of steaming fried smelt, which he set down before us. “A gift,” he said, smiling at Di and me, who were hunched over, our mouths so full that when we said thank you it was completely unintelligible. Mom elbowed us and we swallowed quickly, then exclaimed our “thank you” again so loudly that Lucky jumped. We grabbed the hot fish by their tails, burning our fingers, and our tongues as we sank our teeth into their bellies bursting with nutty, crispy roe.

We were thin then, and our full stomachs bulged like little globes. Though we were still filthy and now reeked of fish and garlic, we were in bliss! Every bowl was licked so clean that it looked like it had been

washed, the meal itself a beacon of light in a time of darkness.

At night we slept like logs, comatose and satisfied until late the next morning, when we woke up far behind our usual schedule. Though our bodies hurt and we groaned as we rose, our spirits were high, recharged by the kindness of strangers and an evening of abandon.

11

Checkpoint

Hour by hour, day by day, we'd completed our circle around the bay and were moving southward to Qingdao. As we inched closer to the city, the Chinese Communist Party inched closer to victory. We heard from other peasants that the People's Liberation Army had crossed the Yangtze River on April twentieth, and in a matter of days, they captured Nanjing. Firecrackers popped as cadres joyfully announced that the PLA had climbed the Presidential Palace and torn down the Nationalist flag, mounting the Communist Party's red and yellow banner over Nanjing.

We had been walking for two weeks, and we'd finally reached a point where there were no longer any small country roads. There was only the big, wide main road to Qingdao, with rickshaws, wagons, horses, and even a few cars and trucks knocking dust in our faces as they barreled past us. The road was getting more crowded with displaced people from the countryside. Some families had only a few pieces of luggage, while others traveled with wagons packed with household furniture precariously balanced and reinforced with rope, moving slowly like snails with shells too large for their bodies.

Qingdao was not yet under Communist control, but every road leading to it was. Though cadres denied these rumors, we heard that the only force keeping the PLA from attacking was the American navy, which

was still docked in Qingdao's harbor.

There were checkpoints everywhere along the road as cadres searched for class enemies, randomly stopping people on their way to the city. Those who did not have the right paperwork were sent back in the opposite direction if they were lucky; people were also being arrested and put into military trucks. I had no idea where the trucks were going, but I was terrified of joining them. I avoided making eye contact, nervous and sweating, praying that the cadres would aim for the cars and horses and let us pass.

Mom, on the other hand, had so much faith in our travel permit that she seemed confident, almost cheerful—as though she had the real thing nestled in her pocket.

“Madam,” said a voice. I looked up and saw a cadre gesturing at us. His face was marked with hundreds of little scars, likely from smallpox, and his nose was crooked, as though it had been broken. My heart leaped into my throat as he walked over to us. Beside me, Di seemed bored—annoyed even, at the interruption. I envied her nonchalance at every checkpoint, wishing that I could borrow some of her composure. Instead, I felt like the household furniture on those wagons that we saw—except instead of rope, it was thread that was holding me together. In the presence of the cadres, a mere pull or twist would send me crashing down.

By then, we had met so many cadres who had been sympathetic and helpful to us. However, as soon as I saw that four-pocket uniform my vision would cloud and I would find myself again at Wildflower Field. I remembered the cadre who fixed my shoes and gave us money, and the cadre who had smiled at us and offered directions, but all of those little acts of kindness amalgamated could not tip the scale against what Comrade Cheng and Comrade Lao had done. I would always be afraid of the cadres. No matter what they did or said, there was an inner voice that reminded me that their words or actions were all based on a lie—the kindness was not for Ang Li-Hai, but for the peasant girl whose toes stuck out of her rag shoes, who was covered in dirt, with a wheelbarrow in her hands and a mountain mutt trailing behind her.

“Travel authorization?” the cadre demanded.

Without blinking, Mom reached into her pocket and gave him the paper. By then it was worn from being handled so much.

Examining it, the cadre said, “Huh. Zhucheng?”

With that one word, any remaining shred of confidence I had disintegrated. This cadre was unlike the rest—this cadre could read. The ground beneath me felt like it was sinking, and I had to brace myself to avoid tumbling forward.

Mom and Di looked fine and calm, Di’s long braid moving slightly as a cool spring breeze blew across the road. That same wind blew my short hair into my eyes, and the hair on the back of my neck rose from the chill. I wondered if they were just braver than I was, or if they simply had not put two and two together to realize that a literate cadre could actually understand what I had written, and recognize where it might be wrong.

“Comrade Lao!” he called. “Come here!”

I grabbed Mom’s arm now, my legs about to give. *Not him. Not Comrade Lao!* How did he find us? He must have traveled by car, deduced that we would eventually come to this road, and waited here with his fellow cadres until someone spotted us. My saliva tasted metallic, like it was tinged with blood. Was I bleeding? Swallowing, I tried to reassure myself. *I’m fine. My mouth is fine. Hold it together!* Desperately, I tried to remember from the cadres’ speeches what Mao had said. *A revolution is not a dinner party.* My eyes darted to the green military trucks that were parked in a row. *All reactionaries are paper tigers.* They were going to throw us all in one of those and take us back to Zhucheng with signs hung around our necks. *Reactionary. Oppressor. Enemy of the People.*

From the other side of the road, an older man we did not recognize walked over. “What is it?” he asked. As he stood next to the smallpox-scarred cadre, I realized that a different Comrade Lao had been called, one in his late fifties, with yellow teeth, deep wrinkles, and a chin full of white stubble. He was not the Comrade Lao who had felt the callus on my finger and assisted Comrade Cheng in Wildflower Field, but somehow my mind could not escape that place. I was holding on to Mom so tightly that she started to discreetly pry my fingers loose. *We serve the people. Take root and blossom.*

“Where is Zhucheng?” the first cadre asked.

“Oh, far,” Older Comrade Lao replied. “At least one hundred kilometers, maybe two hundred! It’s

beyond the bay!”

“Ah, I guess that’s why,” said the first cadre. “The office there must do things differently.” He handed the authorization back to Mom and said, “Sorry. A lot of the rural offices don’t know the standards yet. They just make up their own rules!” He and Older Comrade Lao laughed. “Have a good day, and walk carefully. There will be more cars and horses on this route, and they are fast.”

“Yes, thank you, Comrade,” said Mom, gratefully tucking the permit back into her pocket.

We’d walked away, the wheelbarrow rumbling, when we heard Older Comrade Lao’s voice yell, “Wait!”

Stopping again, we turned cautiously toward him.

“You should put that dog on a rope when you get into the city. It’s not the countryside. You can’t just have your animals loose willy-nilly!”

“Yes, of course,” said Mom, smiling. “Thank you for your kind advice!”

“You are welcome!” Older Comrade Lao called cheerfully. “Safe travels!”

With that, we had passed through the last checkpoint on the way to Qingdao. I should have been elated, but I felt the opposite—bile gurgled in my throat, and I was ready to vomit. Shaking, I could barely keep my grip on the wheelbarrow handles. My body managed to resist until we were out of sight of the checkpoint, and then my legs finally did what they had been threatening to do—they collapsed underneath me and I tumbled to the ground, my cheek slamming onto the dry yellow dirt. Whatever had been holding me together had come undone, and I lay immobile, in pieces on the road, buried beneath snow that was falling only in my mind. It was going to suffocate me.

“Hai!” Mom called, falling to her knees and trying to support my head. Within me the floodgates opened and I started to cry, sob, my entire body wracked with grief. I could barely breathe, my tears like tidal waves pulling me underwater. Sounds were muffled but I could hear Mom asking me if I was okay, and invisible hands had snaked around my throat, blocking any words from coming out of my mouth.

When I managed to talk, all I could utter was, “I can’t breathe.”

Mom hushed me, while Di grabbed a blanket and draped it around my shoulders. The two of them

wrapped me up and guided me to sit against the wheelbarrow, where my hands gripped the spokes as Mom rearranged our clothing to make a cushion. Together, they lifted me and laid me down so that I was curled up with my knees against my chest, the canteens of water beside me.

“It’s okay,” Mom said gently. “We are almost there. Just hang on for a little bit longer.”

Tears continued to stream down my face as I struggled to inhale. *How could I fall apart when we are so close?* I was the oldest, and I was supposed to be strong. If anyone should have ridden in the wheelbarrow it was Lan or Di, not me. I was supposed to help Mom, who already carried so much, and I hated to be another drain on them all.

Mom carried Lan on her back and pushed me in the wheelbarrow, while Di walked beside her and Lucky behind Di. I felt every bump and dip in the road, no matter how slight, yet the swaying of the wheelbarrow was strangely soothing—like I could finally let myself go.

Step by step, just as we had done the entire journey from Zhucheng, we made our way to the city gates of Qingdao. Other travelers passed our slow-moving group, but we continued in silence. Mom’s face was unrelenting and determined, her eyes focused on those stalwart stone walls, unwavering. She looked like a warrior who was about to overtake a city—not for the Nationalists, not for the Communists, but for herself and her daughters.

“Look,” she said as the gates of Qingdao finally loomed over us. “Have you seen anything more beautiful than that?”

Di and I craned our necks up. The ancient wall curved outward, a towering semicircle with an imposing pagoda serving as its sentry. Two entrances framed the sides, and the road split in two as traffic veered in either direction. It must have been years, possibly decades, since these stones were scrubbed, and vibrant moss crept along the bottom and sides of the wall. Most of the slabs held strong, but there were several pockets where the stones had crumbled with age.

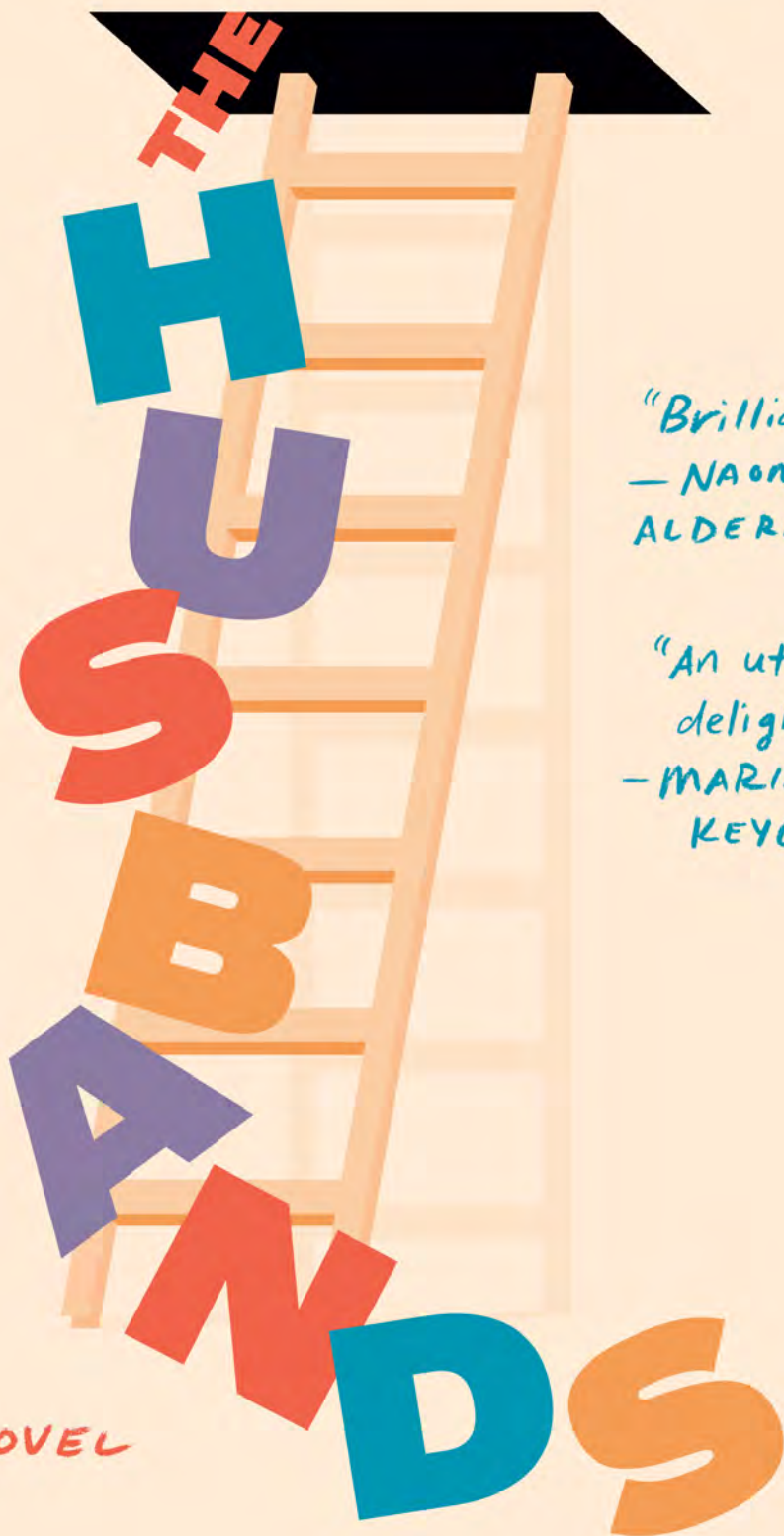
Mom swung toward the left, to the rusty iron gates that were wide-open like metal arms. To me, they looked like the mighty gates of heaven. *Beautiful.*

The bright blue sky above us was blocked out as we passed under the arch of the city entrance. A short

tunnel, and then there was light again. I closed my eyes and let out a long breath as though it were air that I had been holding in for all these past months. I opened my eyes and looked at Mom.

She was covered in dust from the road, cut through by streaks of sweat running down her face, yet she glowed. We had arrived, and she was victorious.

HOLLY GRAMAZIO



THE
H
U
S
A
B
A
N
D
S

"Brilliant."
— NAOMI
ALDERMAN

*"An utter
delight."*
— MARIAN
KEYES

A NOVEL



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2024 Holly Gramazio

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Doubleday, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, and distributed in Canada by Random House Canada Limited, Toronto. Simultaneously published in hardcover in Great Britain by Chatto & Windus Limited, London, in 2024.

doubleday.com

DOUBLEDAY and the portrayal of an anchor with a dolphin are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

[Permissions, if any]

Front-of-cover art based on an illustration by Laralova/Shutterstock
Jacket design by Emily Mahon

[CIP data]

ISBN: 978-0-385-55061-1 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-0-385-55062-8 (eBook)

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First American Edition

CHAPTER 1

The man is tall and has dark tousled hair, and when she gets back quite late from Elena's hen do, she finds him waiting on the landing at the top of the stairs.

She yelps and steps backwards. "What—" she starts, then tries again. "Who are you?"

He sighs. "Fun night?"

Carpeted steps lead up to the man and the dim landing. This is definitely the right flat, isn't it? It must be: her key worked. She's drunk, but she's not drunk enough to commit breaking and entering by accident. She steps back again, and feels for the light switch, keeping her eyes on the stranger.

She finds it. In the sudden glare, everything is as it should be: the angle of the steps, the cream of the walls, even the switch under her fingers, a moment's resistance then *click*. Everything except him.

"Lauren," he says. "Come on. Come up and I'll make you some tea."

He knows her name. Is he—no, it's been months since she had that guy round, and he was blond, he had a beard, this isn't him. A burglar? How would a burglar know her name?

"If you leave," she says, "I won't report this." She will absolutely report this. She reaches behind to the door handle, and tries to turn it, which takes a lot of fiddling but she isn't going to look away, especially not now that—oh god—he's coming down the

stairs. She backs out of her flat and into the hall, takes careful steps until she's grappling with the front door until that pushes open too, warm summer air thick behind her. Out through the spatter of irregular raindrops—but not so far that she can't still see him.

He's crossing the hall, then he's outlined in the doorway, bright light behind him.

"Lauren," the man says, "what are you doing?"

"I'm calling the police," she says, digging in her bag for her phone, hoping it has battery left. The pocket where it should be is occupied instead by a tiny cactus in a painted pot, from today's workshop. The phone itself is further down. It lights up and she rummages, grabs it, pulls it out.

But as she does, she sees the lock screen.

And: it's a picture of herself, standing on a beach with her arm around the man in the doorway.

Two per cent battery, flicking to one. And his face. Unmistakable. And hers.

She grabs with her other hand for the little cactus, holding it ready to throw. "Stay where you are."

"Okay," he says. "Okay. I'm staying here." He's taken a few steps outdoors, feet bare. She looks again: his face glowing from the phone, his face in the night in front of her. He's wearing a grey T-shirt and soft tartan trousers. Not trousers, she realises. Pajamas.

"Right," she says, "come out further," and he does, sighing, another half-dozen barefoot steps on to the pavement, and now she has enough space to edge around him towards the front door, past the closed blinds of the downstairs flat. "Stay there," she says, facing him as she circles. He turns, watching. She steps up through the door, on to the tiles of the hall, and risks a glance to confirm: yes, the closed door to Toby and Maryam's to one side, the open

door to her own flat directly behind her, familiar stairs, the right house.

“Lauren,” she hears the man say. She spins and shrieks and he stops, but she told him to stay where he was, and he’s moved! She slams the front door in his face, then steps quickly into her flat and slams and locks her own door. “Lauren,” he’s still saying from outside. She thumbs her phone again to ring the police after all, but it lights up—his face—and then darkens. Out of battery.

Shit.

“Lauren,” and sounds of the outer door rattling. “Come on.”

She runs up the stairs and across the landing and grapples in the kitchen for her charger. She’ll phone someone, she’ll call Toby downstairs even. But then she hears footsteps, and the man’s coming up, and somehow he’s in the flat. He’s *in the flat*.

She spins and strides to the kitchen door. “Get the fuck out,” she says into the landing, holding the cactus firmly. She’s ready. If he comes any closer, she’ll throw.

“Calm down,” the man says, reaching the top of the stairs. “I’ll get you some water.” He takes a step towards her, and she does it, she throws, but the cactus goes wide, past him, and it hits the wall and bounces off and rolls towards the stairs, *thud, thud, thud-thud-thud*, accelerating down the steps in an otherwise silent night, coming to a stop with a final thud against the door at the bottom.

“What’s wrong with you?” the man says, keys clutched in his hand. That’s how he got in: he stole her spare keys. Of course. Maybe he logged into her computer and changed her phone remotely, and that’s why his picture’s on her lock screen. Is that possible? “Fuck’s sake,” he says. “Go and sit down. Please.”

He turns off the light on the stairs, and switches on the landing light instead, the big square landing with all the rooms leading off it, the big grey landing she passes through a dozen times a day.

Which is, somehow, blue.

And it has a rug. It never had a rug before. Why is there a rug?

She can't stop to look: the man's walking towards her. She backs across the rug, which feels thick and soft even through her shoes, towards the door to the living room. It's right above Toby and Maryam's bedroom. If she screams, she thinks, they'll hear. But even in the dark, the room doesn't seem right.

She feels for the switch.

Click.

Light falls on more strange objects. The sofa is dark brown, and surely when she left this morning it was green. The clock on the wall has Roman numerals instead of normal numbers, and it turns out Roman numerals are difficult to read, VII, XIII, VVI. She has to squint to stop them from blurring. Her old vase on the shelf has tulips in it, her wonky lino print of an owl is gone. The books are wrong or in the wrong place, the curtains have been replaced with shutters. Most of the pictures are wrong and one of them—one of them is *very* wrong. One of them is of a wedding featuring—and she steps up to it, nose almost to the glass—*her*. And the man.

The man who has entered the living room behind her.

The husband.

She turns around and he holds out a pint glass filled with water. After a moment she takes it and notices, for the first time, a ring on her finger.

She transfers the glass to her right hand and spreads her left in front of her, turns it over palm up, ring still there as she folds her fingers in and touches it with the tip of her thumb. Huh.

“Come on,” the husband says. “Sit down. Drink up.”

She sits. The sofa is the same shape it used to be, despite the colour. And it has the same uneven give.

The husband sits too, over in the armchair, and at first she can't see whether he's wearing a wedding ring as well, but he leans for-

ward and there it is: bright on his finger. He's watching her. She watches him in return.

She is, she thinks, very drunk, so it might be that she's missing something obvious. But she's been given a drink by a man she's never met before and, if anything, the fact that she may be unexpectedly married to him should make her more rather than less wary.

"I'll . . . drink this in a moment," she says, carefully, clearly, enunciating each syllable (although there do seem to be more of them than usual).

"Okay."

If he's meant to be here, why isn't he in bed? "Why aren't you in bed?"

He sighs. "I was," he says. "You didn't exactly make a stealth entrance."

"I didn't know you were here!"

"What?" he says. "Look, drink the water and take your dress off and we'll get you ready for bed. Do you need help with the zip?"

"No!" she says, and grabs a throw pillow, pulls it in front of her. Shit. She's never seen him before. She's not taking her dress off in front of him.

"Okay, okay, don't—shh, it's fine, drink your water." His tired face. Round cheeks with a flush of red. "Okay?" he says.

"Okay," she says, and then, after a moment: "I'll sleep here. So as—so as not to disturb you. You can go."

"Do you want the spare room? I'll clear the bed—"

"No," she says. "No. This is good."

"Okay," he says again. "I'll get your pajamas. And the quilt."

She stays upright, still careful, as he leaves and comes back in. The pajamas are her own old set that she bought from the big Sainsbury's, the ones with Moomins on them, but the quilt is another new thing: dark-blue and light-blue squares, alternating, arranged like patchwork but it's just a print. She doesn't like it.

“I know, but look at it this way,” he says, “if you chuck up on it you’ll finally have an excuse to throw it out.”

This doesn’t make sense, “finally,” but everything is intense and confusing and she doesn’t want to argue. The room is buzzing gently.

“Okay,” she says. They seem to be taking it in turns to say “okay” and sighing or waiting, which perhaps is what marriage is like; this is the first time she’s tried it.

The husband turns on a lamp and then turns off the overhead light. “You good?” he says. “Do you want some toast?”

“I had chips.” She still has the taste in her mouth. “And chicken.” She is a vegetarian but not when she’s drunk.

“Okay,” he says once more. “Drink your water,” he adds again, just before he closes the door. She hears him in the kitchen, then the bedroom, and then nothing.

Well.

She goes to the door and listens for a moment. Silence on the landing, and through the flat. She puts on her pajamas, step by step like she’s in a school changing room: first the shorts over her underpants, then the dress over her head, then the pajama top on over her bra, then the bra off, unhooked and her arms wriggled out one by one until she can pull it triumphantly from an armhole, at which point she overbalances and tumbles back on to the sofa with a thump and a clatter as her dead phone falls off the cushions and on to the ground.

She freezes, waiting to see if the husband comes back. Nothing.

A creak, maybe. A truck or a bus outside, up on the main road.

At least now she’s sitting down.

Another rumble of a car outside. Maybe a train, further back, although it’s late for that. Perhaps she’s imagined it, and the husband.

If she hasn’t imagined him, there’s a strange man in her house. She pushes herself back up to stand unsteadily one more time.

Quiet steps to the table in the corner, and she takes a chair and carries it—slowly, slowly—over to the door. She hasn't ever done this before but she's seen it in so many movies: you wedge the chair and it keeps the door shut, right? She sets it down and balances it, the back hooked up under the handle. It takes her a couple of tries, but finally it's there, jammed in place, and she looks at it and goes to sit on the sofa and figure out what to do next, and then she's asleep.

CHAPTER 2

She wakes to find that she's feeling less drunk and much, much more terrible.

The room is bright, the slats of the shutters tilted to let in warm light, turning everything yellow.

She stands up. It goes mostly okay. Looks around. The chair she used to barricade herself in last night is on its side lying next to, but in no way blocking, the door, which is half-open, letting in noises from the rest of the flat: footsteps, a clatter.

The husband.

She is not feeling her best, but she picks up her dead phone and rights the fallen chair and peers out. The sound is coming from the kitchen.

She rushes across the landing into the bathroom, on tiptoe, and locks the door. She's torn between emptying her bladder and throwing up; opts to prioritise the second, leaning over the bowl as she gives in to the rising thrust of a good drunken chuck.

Her headache dissipates right away, and her nausea subsides, leaving behind a glorious clarity that she knows will last for twenty minutes at most before her body realises it has outstanding issues to address. At the basin, she swirls water around her mouth, spits it out, then drinks again and swallows this time. She wants very much to brush her teeth, but on the corner of the sink sit two unfamiliar toothbrushes, one yellow, one green. Toothpaste on her finger, then.

It's been a while since she last drank this much.

"Lauren?" the husband calls from outside the door, so close.

". . . Yes," she says. "Give me a minute."

"I'll put on some breakfast."

She stares at the door, waiting to hear him move away, then washes her face, cleaning away the last remnants of the night's glitter and mascara. Takes her pajama top off, wipes herself with a washcloth: face, shoulders, under the breasts, under the arms. She can shower when she's figured out what's going on with the husband.

Her clothes from last night are in the laundry basket. He must have come into the living room while she was sleeping and picked them up. The dress is dry-clean only and the laundry basket is absolutely the wrong place for it, but underneath it she finds last night's bra and a man's shirt, boxers, a grey jumper she recognises as hers and a pair of leggings she doesn't. Bra, jumper, then she swaps the pajama pants for the leggings and looks in the mirror.

Concealer? Mascara? No. She's not going on a date: she's trying to find out why this man is in her house. She's clean, or clean-ish, and that's enough.

She unlocks the door.



The husband (cardigan, trousers) is in the kitchen, where the walls are not the yellow she remembers but rather the same blue as the landing. Her toaster (unchanged), a coffee machine (new), a tiny table with two stools squeezed in against the wall (new). Something is frying on the stove.

"It's alive," the husband says as she walks in. "Here," he adds, and hands her a coffee, turns back to the machine to make another. "Bacon's nearly ready."

"I'm a vegetarian," she says without conviction.

“There are no atheists in foxholes,” the husband says.

There’s a charger plugged into the wall, its cord lying in a loop across the little table. She sits at the stool on the far side and connects her phone. He constructs a sandwich and puts it in front of her on the table.

If he was a murderer, he could have just murdered her last night—waiting till the morning and poisoning her with a bacon sandwich would be a roundabout way of doing it. And when she takes a bite, the sandwich is good, really good: crispy-edged, salty, buttery, the chew of fresh bread, the tang of brown sauce. She had started to avoid pork even before she went vegetarian; pigs are as clever as a human three-year-old, she heard once, the same day she went to her nephew Caleb’s third birthday party, and that was it. But throwing out a sandwich now wouldn’t save any pigs. And by the fourth or fifth slow bite, she is feeling a little bit better.

“So,” the husband says, sitting opposite her with a sandwich for himself. “Good night?”

It had been such a good night. She remembers painting the cactus pots in that little shop, then drinks while the pots dried, then a big dinner, and karaoke, and a cocktail bar, and then dancing, and more drinks, and shoving late-night chips into her face, salty and greasy, while Elena took photos of the two of them posing in the mirrored tiles of the chicken shop, its lights glowing warm in the cooling night. She remembers Elena promising not to abandon her for a married-person life of married-person things, *you know I would never*. She remembers climbing to the top floor of the night bus to Norwood and sitting down and seeing the moon impossibly huge in the sky. She remembers looking out at London through the spatter of summer rain on the window, traffic lights and strangers and kebabs and the wide bridge and the long journey towards streets where the city relaxes and spreads into suburbs.

And then: arriving home, and finding the husband.

“Yeah,” she says. How does a conversation with a husband work? “What about you? What did you get up to?”

“Went for a swim,” he says. “Tidied up a bit. Helped Toby fix that window so they won’t get in trouble with their landlord.” Okay, she thinks, the husband knows Toby. He continues: “Finally put those boxes up in the attic. Might turn over the veg patch today.”

He sounds very industrious. She doesn’t have a vegetable patch, but perhaps he’s brought it with him. The whole flat has become a spot-the-difference puzzle: more cookbooks, the dent in the wall from when she swung the door too hard that time has disappeared, a light is still sitting askew in its socket. The cactus pot she painted yesterday is on the windowsill, and the cactus lopsided inside it. The husband must have collected it from the bottom of the steps for her. He does seem nice.

Which doesn’t stop it from being disturbing that he’s here.

He appeared while she was out. If she leaves and comes back, might everything be normal again? “I’m . . . going to go for a walk. Clear my head,” she tries.

“Want some company?”

“No, I’m okay.” Maybe she’s misunderstanding something and as soon as she gets a little air, it’ll all make sense.

She finds socks, shoes, keys. Back in the kitchen for her phone, which has charged to thirty per cent. The husband is chewing cheerfully on the last of his sandwich. She opens the fridge for a hangover Coke but there’s only a can of grapefruit-flavoured water. She takes that instead.

Down the steps and outside, and she looks back at the house, those new shutters.

The rest of the street. Houses, an empty skip halfway up towards the main road, trees and their green leaves. She walks away from the house, counting twenty steps, then looks behind her: the shutters are still there.

When she reaches the corner, she can see the bus stop from last night. As far as she can tell, it's the same as it always was. Behind it, the petrol station, and kids talking over each other, their bikes leaning against a wall. She crosses the road, sits down on the bus stop's tilted bench, and pulls her phone out.

The lock screen is still her and the man, standing together, the sea behind them.

She touches the screen, and it demands a passcode. Maybe this, too, will have changed; but, no, it unlocks to the code she's used for years.

She opens her photos first, and scrolls backwards through last night. The bus ride, the chicken shop, the bar, the other bar, the pottery workshop with everyone's plant pots lined up together, Elena's with the diamond patterns, Noemi's with its elegant looping dicks. Fine. Then she filters to show selfies only, skims the past year: some with just her but more with her and the husband, squinting into the sunlight. Further into the past: he's still there, in and out of the pictures. He has a beard. It's gone again. They're on a hill. They're by a tree. They're in front of a swan; the swan is approaching them; she's trying to feed the swan; the swan isn't happy.

She looks up from the impossibility of it, the man's face on her phone against the sunny day. One of the kids at the petrol station is kicking a plastic bottle along the pavement while the other keeps goal. A taxi pulls in across the road and lets someone out.

She checks her sent messages: lots of hearts to Elena, *I LOVE YOU I KNOW YOU'RE GOING TO BE SO HAPPY*, and a photo back from her of their chicken-shop reflections captioned *It must be difficult for everyone else that we're so beautiful*. In another thread Lauren finds she has sent a *HOME SOON I WILL SEE YOU HOM SOON YESS HELLO SOON* to—ah, here we go—a Michael.

The husband is called Michael. She scrolls up through the messages.

Another one to him, from two days ago: *Lemons, dishwashing liquid, thx!*

Another: a picture of a pear with big googly eyes stuck on it.

One from him, a few days earlier: *Almost there see you in five.*

When she searches her own messages for “Michael,” she finds she’s mentioning him constantly to everyone: Michael’s away for work, Michael’s training for a half-marathon so he can’t come out to the pub, Michael’s bringing panzanella to the barbecue. Michael this, Michael that. Nobody has responded with *What the hell, who’s Michael?*

Well. If her friends know about him, maybe one of them can explain.

She finds Toby in her phone; the husband mentioned him, and he lives downstairs, he should know what’s going on. *Hey, she messages, am I married.*

An almost immediate reply: *Last I heard, he responds. Tall kid, nice face. Lives with you. You know the one*

Okay when did we get married

The response: *14 April. Is this a quiz? Do I win?*

14 April. This year? A couple of months ago, if so. There weren’t any pictures of a wedding in her photoroll, but she looks in her messages instead, and eventually finds, sent to her mum: *These are the first few—we’ll get the rest from the photographer in a month or two.*

And then, four photos.

A group shot first, the one she saw in the living room. Her in a cream dress, long sleeves, flared skirt to mid-calf, pink heels, a bunch of pink flowers (not roses, something else). No veil. The husband, Michael, in a dark-brown suit. Her mum. Elena and Nat and a woman she doesn’t know are bridesmaids in different shades of green. Strangers: his friends, his family.

The next photo: just her and the husband, dancing. Looking at each other. He’s smiling, she’s serious.

The next: signing papers.

And the last: her and Michael again, kissing. She touches her lips. They're dry.

So, she had a wedding.

She's married. She has a husband, who is back at the flat.

A message from him pops up on the screen, as if to confirm: *Hey if you pass a shop could you get a light bulb? Screw-in, not bayonet.*

She almost drops the phone—it's as if he's caught her spying on him—but she calms herself and messages back, *Sure*. That's the kind of thing you say, right?

Okay, what else? First, she searches "Michael" in her email and finds a surname: Michael Callebaut.

She has also, apparently, become a Callebaut. Well. It's a step up from Strickland.

She gets her phone out again and googles the husband but there are a bunch of Michael Callebauts, so she adds "London," scrolls through the image results. God, does she even remember what he looks like? Yes: there he is, gazing at her, a headshot in front of stone.

It's from an architectural firm that lists him halfway down their "About Us" page. The company's website has pictures of churches, a library, a hall in the financial district, a fairground. She can't always tell whether their designs are real photographs of things they've built or computer mock-ups of things they've imagined.

An architect, though! What a perfect job for a husband. Ambitious yet concrete, artistic yet practical, glamorous yet without an industry-wide drug problem. No wonder he's filled in the dent in the kitchen wall and planted a vegetable garden. Wait, might her job be different in this new world? She checks, and no: she's still a business advisor at the council, persuading companies to move to Croydon and helping local residents set up new projects. Her calendar is highlighted blue instead of green, but it has most of the same meetings, maybe in a different order.

Still. Plenty of other changes to be getting on with. "Lauren

Callebaut,” she says out loud, trying it out. She opens the can of water and takes a sip. It’s metallic and unpleasant, somehow tasteless and sour at the same time, but she takes another. Perhaps this is her new life: she drinks grapefruit water now.



She walks back slowly, carefully, picking up a light bulb at the petrol station and dawdling, stopping a moment at the corner to her road, trying to give normality a chance to re-establish itself; but as she nears the house she can still see, in the living-room windows, shutters instead of the curtains that were there yesterday.

The front door: no. Not yet. She circles around the side instead, sidles past the bins, takes in the house from the back, looks up towards the bedroom and the kitchen where she can see that a ceramic jar she has never owned is sitting just inside the window, stuffed with utensils.

The garden has changed a little. Toby and Maryam’s side, visible across the low fence, is the same as always, enthusiastically started but erratically maintained. Her half—hers and Michael’s, she supposes—is looking a little better than it used to, with the vegetable patch at the back (it’s very minimal, some peas and lettuce). A row of pinkish flowers along the fence. A half-filled bowl with dry pellets by the outdoor tap. She has a cat. Or Michael has a cat? They have a cat together?

What is my cat called, she messages Toby.

She texts her sister, Nat, too, *Quick question, what do you think about my relationship situation*, and Elena, *Was anything weird for you when you got home last night?*

She gets a call right away from Nat, and answers, but it turns out it’s Caleb with Nat’s phone.

“Auntie Lauren!” he says. “Do you want to listen while I do some karate?”, then there’s rustling noises, and a yell, and a thud.

“Caleb,” she calls. “Caleb. Is Mummy there?”

“No! She’s giving Magda a bath! I’ll do the kick again.”

At this point she’d take any adult. “What about Mamma?”

“No! They say getting Magda in the bath is a job for two! Did you hear it?”

God, she loves him but this is not the time. “Caleb. I’m going to have to go. Give Mummy her phone back, okay? And tell her to call me. You can send me a video of the karate, all right?”

“I’ll give it to her if you get Uncle Michael!” Caleb says. “Uncle Michael always listens to me.”

Huh. Maybe Caleb has more to contribute to this than she thought. “Yes. Caleb. What can you tell me about Uncle Michael?”

“He loves it when I show him my good kicks,” Caleb says decisively. “And his favourite dinosaur is the triceratops and his favourite bird is the swan.”

“And you’ve seen him a lot?”

“I’m his favourite nephew!”

“Caleb. Do you remember the wedding? When Uncle Michael and I got married?”

“It was boring,” he says. “Tell Uncle Michael to call me about some kicking,” and he hangs up.

She looks at the phone.

“Are you okay?” Toby says from the other side of the fence. He’s on the steps outside his back door, holding his phone. Steady voice, big dimple, unflattering baggy T-shirt. It’s good to see not everything has changed.

“Yeah,” she says, “just—I didn’t have a husband yesterday. And now I’ve had a husband for months? Who likes to practise kicks with my nephew? I mean, as far as I can tell he’s perfectly pleasant.”

“I like him.” Toby has always been good at taking things in stride. During lockdowns the two of them had hung out in their respective gardens while Maryam was at the hospital, drinking cups of tea and chatting quietly, and he had been dependable and

unruffled and a comfort in the strangeness. It feels good to say, out loud, what's happened now.

"It's very surprising," she says. "And apparently we've got a cat?"

"Yeah?"

"What's it called?"

"Gladstone," he says.

"Like the prime minister?"

"Yeah, because of the sideburns, you said."

Lauren is sure she doesn't know what Gladstone's sideburns looked like. What did Gladstone do? How racist was he? Does she have a problematic cat? This is perhaps not her most pressing issue.

"How long have I been seeing Michael?"

"Wait, do you really not remember? Are you—did you hurt yourself? Do you want me to get Maryam?"

"No, I'm fine," she says. "I don't need a doctor. I'm just joking, ignore me, I'm good."

○ ○

Around the front, she hesitates again. The main door, the tiled hallway, her own front door, the stairs.

"Hello," she calls out, tentative, and the husband pokes his head out to look down from the landing. "Welcome back," he says. "Good walk?"

"Yeah," she says. "Sure." Up the stairs, one at a time.

"Did you get the light bulb?" the husband asks.

"Oh," she says, and fishes in the bag, holding it out as she reaches the top. "Yeah, here."

She's going to have to tell someone what's happened, she thinks. Maybe she's even going to have to tell this man, this husband. But first, she needs a little sit. "Do you want a cup of tea?"

"That'd be great," he says. "Just gimme a sec. The attic light

was out when I was up there yesterday, let me change it while I remember.”

“Yeah,” she says, “okay.” She heads into the kitchen while he stays on the landing and pulls the ladder down—hears him jerk it to one side at the place where it always catches, like he’s lived here for years. In the fridge, she is confronted by three different milks in a row: oat, cashew, dairy. God, and what if he drinks it black? He’s an architect, after all. She’ll just have to ask, and if he thinks it’s weird, then so be it. Maybe it’ll be a way into a conversation that she still doesn’t know how to start. “Do you want milk?” she calls out, stepping back on to the landing with the blue mug in her hands.

“What?” says an entirely different man, climbing down the ladder from the attic.

ALL
WE WERE
PROMISED

A Novel

ASHTON
LATTIMORE

All We Were Promised is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical figures, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

Where real-life historical persons appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2024 by Ashton Lattimore

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books,
an imprint of Random House, a division of
Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

BALLANTINE is a registered trademark and the colophon
is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Hardback ISBN 978-0-593-60015-3

Ebook ISBN 978-0-593-60016-0

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

randomhousebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

FIRST EDITION

Book design by Barbara M. Bachman

Chapter 1

CHARLOTTE

Philadelphia, 1837

THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA WASN'T WHAT IT CLAIMED TO BE. But after four years of living here with her father, Charlotte knew there was a lot of that going around. It was unseasonably warm that November morning in Washington Square Park, enough to leave Charlotte and her friend Nell sweating under their dresses even as amber and gold leaves crunched beneath their feet. In Philadelphia, a stray hot day was as good as summer, when folks would gather at parks and carousels and crowd onto the cobblestone streets in messy, loud-talking clumps that circled and melted into one another. But warm weather also meant rioting season: when all the city's resentments between Black and white, freedman and immigrant, working folks and the struggling poor boiled over. Though the near-holy parchment at Independence Hall claimed all men were equal, the words told only half the story—in the heat, the city's people rarely shied from acting out the rest. And in the cooler months after all the ruckus, the city would hush and turn itself inward, with everyone huddled into stately brick town houses and tumbledown back-alley tenements alike, as if embarrassed by all the thrashing and carrying on.

Charlotte had seen the same cycle play out for four years going, and that morning she knew that all the conditions were ripe for a

mob scene. Still, as she and Nell sat together fanning themselves a few rows back from the open-air wooden stage waiting for Mr. Robert Purvis's speech to start, she was lulled into a fool's sense of safety.

After all, it had been Nell's idea to attend. With her hair pulled back into a neat bun, two perfectly curled tendrils framing her deep brown face, and an immaculate lace shawl draped over her lavender wool and silk dress with pleated sleeves, Nell looked every inch the daughter of the city's monied Black elite—not the sort of woman you'd expect to lead you into a street tussle. Beside her, Charlotte self-consciously smoothed down her drab gray housemaid uniform. The color did nothing for her tawny brown complexion, but even such a sorry palette didn't dim the natural prettiness of her face: deep mauve lips shaped in a Cupid's bow beneath the wide-set mahogany eyes she'd inherited from her father. Those were among the many things he'd given her that she'd never asked for.

These days, Charlotte was in the habit of going more or less wherever Nell suggested, if only to get out of the little row house on Fourth Street that her father—no, boss—meant to serve as both her charge and her cage.

"I'm so pleased you decided to come," Nell said, "but are you certain your employer won't mind you stepping away from your duties this morning?"

"He'd have to notice before he paid it any mind," Charlotte said. Lately her father was far too wrapped up in his work to have any idea what she got up to while he was at the workshop, which was just how Charlotte liked it.

"Well then, I suppose neither of us exactly has permission to be here," said Nell, leaning over conspiratorially. "I let my mother think I was off to meet with my sewing circle."

Charlotte laughed. "I won't tell if you won't."

Though she and Nell ought not have been there in the first place—in their parents' eyes, anyhow—at the start there hardly seemed anything to worry about. The gathering was only meant to be a simple public talk, but the topic was a touchy one. Pennsylvania might be a free state, but that didn't always amount to much—the

state legislature was floating a plan to strip free Black men of the vote, and to hear Nell tell it, Mr. Purvis was one of the scheme's fiercest critics. That's why the sight of him was such a shock. When the clock struck eleven, a tall, slim man with olive-colored skin and deep brown, wavy hair strode across the stage dressed in a finely tailored deep blue morning jacket with the chain of a gold watch glinting from his breast pocket. Charlotte gasped so sharply at the sight of him that Nell leaned over to ask if she was unwell. She gave a shaky nod in reply, but couldn't stop staring.

If Mr. Purvis had taken a notion to pass for white, he'd have fooled most anyone who saw him. But from the very first lines of his speech, it was clear the man's interests didn't run across the color line in that direction. Charlotte listened intently as he held forth for nearly an hour in a voice both elegant and booming, laying into the state legislators who held out their left hand to collect taxes from free Black Pennsylvanians even as the right hand busily drafted more laws that insulted their dignity—"the dignity of colored people like me," he declared. Before long, his speech waded into the thick of things: slavery, and what the government owed to the freedmen and fugitive slaves who poured into the city by the hundreds.

The audience in the park was rapt. Trouble was, they weren't the only ones listening. Mr. Purvis's words carried onto the sidewalks surrounding the little corner of Washington Square Park, and before long, Charlotte realized that nearly three dozen passersby—all white, mostly men—had slowly filled in around the audience. A handful loomed behind the stage as well, with their hardened, unmoving stares fixed on the man at the podium.

Even as they pressed in closer, Nell was too much in her element to notice, constantly leaning over to Charlotte and whispering helpful facts to put the speech in context. Charlotte knew more about the subject of slavery than her genteel friend realized, but far be it from her to deprive Nell of a teaching opportunity. Nell knew her only as a housemaid, and that made their keeping company strange enough without bringing up the small matter of Charlotte's also being a runaway slave.

As Purvis drilled in on making the city safe for abolitionists and the fugitives forced into the shadows by fear, Charlotte's mouth went dry. She suddenly felt sure that everyone could tell—that she was marked. Was the earthy musk of the plantation cabin's hard dirt floors still hanging on her skin, even after these years away? Could people spy a house slave's stooped back and shuffling steps in her walk? And in the shape of her utterly plain garments, Charlotte could almost trace the pattern of a slave's linen rags—how easily must everyone else see it? Her cheeks burned.

But she hardly had time to stew in her shame, because when Mr. Purvis reached the section of his speech calling for the legislature to punish rogue slave catchers, his words were a spark on a pile of dried leaves. The white men's agitated murmurs picked up, until finally someone snarled, "Shut your mouth, you high-yellow sonuvabitch!"

Mr. Purvis put up his hands and called for calm, but not a second later, a sharp gray rock hit him square in the shoulder and another only narrowly missed his head. He stumbled back as a gang of white men rushed in toward the stage and the crowd alike. The mob started to grab Black men from the outer rows of the audience and beat them mercilessly, raining down blows with fists and folding chairs. Charlotte and Nell, frozen in their seats, looked at each other. They were women, but no less Black, and mobs weren't in the habit of making distinctions—they had to get away. Now. They scrambled up and ran.

In the rush, Charlotte tripped and smacked her face on the leg of an overturned chair. The sharp pain pierced deep into her cheekbone, throbbing even as she and Nell dashed for the street. But before they could get out of the park, they were met with a wall of twisted, screaming faces. Raging men grasped at them, blasting hot, sour breath into Charlotte's nose. One man's filthy hand tore the sleeve half off her dress, adding the pop of ripping threads to the overwhelming racket of the brawling around them. Incredibly, Nell started shouting back into the men's faces, apparently convinced they'd give way after a loud but polite request. "Move aside, please! Excuse me!" When they finally pushed through an opening in the

crowd, Nell and Charlotte took off running down the block. Behind them, the brittle sound of breaking wood cut through the shouting as the rioters tore apart the stage, smashed the folding chairs, and tossed them into a pile for kindling. Of course—fire. Always fire.

Charlotte and Nell ran for several blocks, until Charlotte's chest was ready to explode. When they finally reached Chestnut Street, it was quiet enough for them to stop and catch their breath, but Charlotte scanned the area warily. Dangerous as the city streets could be, the rioters weren't her only worry. Her father's woodworking shop was blocks away, but even a city as grand as Philadelphia seemed dangerously small when the person you were trying to avoid might be around any corner.

She kept her head down, but her damp, ruined dress and increasingly swollen face made her feel like a spectacle. Beside her, Nell brushed dirt off her own dress and Charlotte wondered if all this was old hat to her—born into a free family, Nell had lived in the city her whole life, after all. She did seem a little shaken, but more than that, Charlotte realized, Nell was furious.

"Mr. Purvis didn't speak an untrue word, whatever those ruffians have to say about it," she huffed. "The way this country enslaves and abuses colored people is shameful! As a free state, we ought to be doing everything we can to spread abolition, but those men want us to be no better than the South!"

Charlotte shifted her weight from one foot to the other and offered only a halfhearted "mm-hmm" as they stepped off the sidewalk to make way for a man carrying an armful of fabric into a nearby tailor's shop.

"I'm so sorry about all this," Nell said. "I should've known, I just thought since the speech was only meant to be about voting . . ."

"We're fine now, don't worry," Charlotte said, sounding more at ease than she felt. What time was it? She really did need to get off the streets before anyone at home realized she was gone.

"But look at you!" Nell reached out to touch Charlotte's exposed shoulder through the rip in her dress. "Here, take this," she said, wrapping her lace shawl around Charlotte. "I'm so, so very sorry. I

hope this won't put you off our plans. Everyone in the Wheatley Literary Association is so looking forward to meeting you next week."

Charlotte smiled. "I don't rattle too easy, and neither do you, by the look of it."

No matter what had happened, there was no way she'd go back on accepting Nell's invitation to her exclusive book club. For Charlotte, the Wheatley Association promised a path toward a life that was her own, instead of one in the margins of her father's. She'd been preparing for weeks, combing through the few books she had at home to find the perfect reading, and stitching herself a passable new outfit to wear. Well, near new, anyhow.

"I'll be there," she reassured Nell. "But I really ought to get home, this dress wants mending. Will you be all right?"

Nell shrugged almost casually. "I'll keep to the back streets on my way home. Promise me you'll look after yourself—make sure to put a cold compress on your face," she said. "And I'll see you at the meeting next week! I can promise it'll be a much quieter time, at the very least." She winked and waved goodbye, and Charlotte started eastward for Society Hill.

Hustling past the rows of redbrick townhomes with painted shutters in subdued tones of beige, powder blue, and forest green, with bored white ladies gazing out the windows, she walked as fast as she could without breaking into a run. The sight of a Black housemaid sprinting down the street of such a well-appointed Philadelphia neighborhood—even one where she worked—would attract attention, and she had no time for that kind of trouble.

When she finally made the turn onto Fourth Street, where the blocks of wide four-story brick town houses gave way to simpler row homes, she breathed a sigh of relief: no one was watching. She quickly unlocked the green door of her house, pushed it open, and in one fluid motion slid off each shoe and shook off the dust over the shrub beside the front steps. She'd done the same thing dozens of times since the summer, a few months ago, when she'd first met Nell and started slipping out of the house while her father and the house-

hold cook, Darcel, were away. She was careful to leave no evidence that she ever set foot outside the house, but after the commotion in the park she'd barely made it back on time. Every Tuesday, Darcel returned from the market at 12:30 on the dot, and it was 12:27 by Charlotte's pocket watch.

She crept up to the attic in her stocking feet. Her tight quarters there were drafty and dim. The only bright spot was her sewing corner, a straight-backed wooden chair and a wide table set against the wall to take advantage of what little light peeked in from the tiny circular window. The table was laid out with needles of varying sizes, two thimbles, scissors, a pincushion, and thread, mostly in shades of gray, brown, and off-white for mending her own uniforms and her father's shirts. After stitching her sleeve back onto her dress, Charlotte spent the rest of the day attending to her chores in a fog of boredom and irritation, with her face throbbing.

In the years since she and her father had run off from White Oaks plantation, he'd transformed her from Massah and Missus Murphy's slave to his own housemaid, and from his daughter, Carrie, to his domestic servant, "Charlotte." Meanwhile, he'd reinvented himself too: a runaway slave no more, in Philadelphia he was an up-and-coming white tradesman whose success financed their new lives. Charlotte supposed she ought to have been grateful, but for what? Trudging someone else's laundry out back to the boiling pot in the cool of an early morning, sewing up the busted threads of another pair of britches, and dusting the same ornately carved end table for what must've been the hundredth time, most days her "freedom" felt the worst kind of familiar, a miserable echo of the old days on the plantation: slow and small, with her eye always fixed on what someone else needed.

But the loneliness, that was new. At least at White Oaks she'd had little Evie. For as long as Charlotte could remember, the two had worked together to look after their mistress, Missus Kate: washing and mending her clothes, dressing her, keeping her room tidy. In those days, when Charlotte smoothed down a bedspread, there was always another pair of little brown hands smoothing right along

with her, a giggling face cracking little girls' jokes amid the drudgery. Now, as she worked her way through the city row house, there was no one, and not a sound.

In the parlor, she narrowed in on the spindly-legged, sharp-cornered end table beside the rust-red damask sofa. Though it was one of the furnishings her father was most proud of having created in his increasingly prominent workshop, the grooves on the surface and the intricately carved floral patterns atop the legs made it a daily thorn in her side. No matter how doggedly she'd wipe the table down, by the next morning the sun would light up the thin film of dust that had settled itself into the crevices like new fallen flurries. That afternoon, she made up her mind she'd never dust it again.

After all, she was on the verge of much more important doings outside these four walls. If some tidying slipped, her father would just have to live with it. If he noticed, that is. In truth, the parlor didn't see much use, making it a perfectly safe space for Charlotte's small personal stand—another one of the minor mutinies fueled by a mix of weariness and resentment that had piled up over the last few months, entirely out of his sight and, so far, mercifully overlooked. Still, when she strode out of the room to attend to the rest of her duties, she glanced back at the dusty table and smirked. As she moved through the rest of the house, the silent hours bled into one another as the sun sank lower in the sky.

That evening, extra footfalls and laughter on the front steps announced that her father had come home from his woodworking shop with a friend in tow. Charlotte smoothed her starched apron over her dress and met them at the door, keeping her head down in hopes he wouldn't notice the tender red spot on her cheek. Her father walked in first, exaggeratedly ducking his nearly six-foot frame underneath the door lintel. He didn't need to, but must've liked calling attention to what Charlotte guessed was his second-favorite feature.

"Good evening, Charlotte," he said, handing her his hat.

"Evening, Mr. Vaughn." She had long since stopped calling him "Papa." When they'd fled the Maryland plantation, they spent two

weariness days trudging and scrambling through the forests between White Oaks and the nearby towns, constantly alert for the sound of baying hounds or twigs snapping under a slave catcher's footsteps, until they finally came to a road that would lead them north. But they'd made it only a few miles before a man stopped them. He'd sized them up, and Charlotte prayed he wouldn't notice their mud-caked clothes in the waning dusk sunlight. Whatever else he saw, though, his attention must've settled on James's cream-hued face and wavy brown hair, a stark contrast with Charlotte's brown skin.

"You headed up toward Delaware, sir?" he'd asked. James froze and nodded warily. Before he had a chance to panic, the man went on. "Storm's coming down from that way. There are a few taverns about a mile up. You'll want to settle in somewhere for the night with your slave."

Upon the last word, James had exhaled and the deeply etched lines of worry melted off his face. Just like that, they weren't two runaway slaves anymore, or even a Black father and daughter. No, he was a white man and she was his enslaved maid. In that moment, a sickening heat rose up underneath Charlotte's skin. For one wild second, she'd imagined peeling it off in a single layer, stepping outside it, and running away.

They'd walked on in silence. Of course, Charlotte understood the ruse was the best way to keep from being caught until they reached the free North. But in the years since, what had begun as a convenient cover had hardened into a way of life. And so it was that evening.

"My business associate, Mr. Ethan Wilcox, will be joining me for dinner," James said, gesturing toward the sandy-blond-haired white man who'd come in behind him. Charlotte looked the man over and raised an eyebrow as she took in the gaudier details that adorned his finely tailored light gray suit: a peach silk cravat, silver buttons with what looked like flecks of sapphire in the middle, and a polished gold pocket watch chain dangling on one side of his chest. He seemed out of place beside James, who was in an unadorned suit jacket and plain waistcoat of the same deep blue shade Mr. Purvis had worn. Even as

Charlotte eyed Mr. Wilcox, he didn't bother to acknowledge her, and James offered no introduction. She took a step back and stood beside the coatrack.

"Please go and tell Darcel we'll have one more for supper this evening."

"Yes sir." Charlotte nodded and started toward the kitchen as James led Mr. Wilcox into the parlor.

The rhythm of their conversation and laughter picked up and echoed through the house. Past the back stairway, Charlotte poked her head into the kitchen, where the scents of browned butter and garlic flooded her nostrils. "Darcel—" she began. He held up a spoon and cut her off without even turning around.

"I know, I know, I heard 'em come in. There's plenty, and just about ready, too. Now go on with you," he huffed. That was about as much as Darcel ever said to her. After all, he was probably near her father's age or even older. He was short and stocky, and with a round, balding head and deep bronze skin. When he spoke, his words were gruff, but the cadence of his speech had a lilting musicality that was like no accent Charlotte had ever heard.

In the dining room, Charlotte laid down another place setting. The dining table was another one of James's showpieces, perfectly carved by his own hand: a long, flawlessly polished oval made from cherrywood, with turned legs. While he'd once filled their cabin at White Oaks with cast-off pieces too irregular to sell on Massah Murphy's behalf, since they'd settled in Philadelphia, he'd gradually started keeping some of his best work for himself. The table was slightly too large for the room's modest size and could seat a dozen—James's grand ambitions of entertaining made manifest.

At dinner, James and Mr. Wilcox tucked into plates piled with roast chicken in a savory butter sauce, garlic wild rice, and boiled carrots sprinkled with cinnamon. Snippets of their conversation carried into the pantry, where Charlotte waited quietly, leaning against the wooden counter. They were putting their heads together on a scheme to expand James's workshop, and for Mr. Wilcox to introduce him around to some new potential buyers. Though the details of her fa-

ther's business didn't interest her, Charlotte kept listening until Mr. Wilcox left and her father retreated to his office.

Off to the side in the pantry, Darcel had left her a plate that included a few extra scoops of wild rice, Charlotte's favorite. With her father gone, she settled into her seat at the dining room table. She always sat just to the left of the head chair, where she imagined she'd place herself if she and James ever took a meal together. Idly, she wondered whether Mr. Purvis was somewhere across town, eating with his own family and telling them the horrors he'd narrowly escaped that morning.

Charlotte ate alone and in silence, slowly and carefully, practicing for some far-off evening when she hoped to have dinners of her own to attend and company to share them with, somewhere outside the stifling confines of this house. Until then, as she did every night, Charlotte would clear her dishes away and smooth the tablecloth down, running her hand over it to gather any wayward crumbs. Before leaving the dining room, she blew out the last of the few remaining candles, leaving no trace.

"Brilliant . . . Melissa Mogollon did not come to play."
—KILEY REID, *NEW YORK TIMES* bestselling author of *SUCH A FUN AGE*

OYE



a Novel

MELISSA MOGOLLON

Oye is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2024 by Melissa Mogollon

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Hogarth, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

HOGARTH is a trademark of the Random House Group Limited, and the H colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mogollon, Melissa, author.

Title: *Oye*: a novel / Melissa Mogollon.

Description: First edition. | New York: Hogarth, [2024]

Identifiers: LCCN 2023018855 (print) | LCCN 2023018856 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593594902 (hardcover; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9780593594919 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Domestic fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3613.03756 094 2024 (print) | LCC PS3613.03756 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20230607

LC record available at lcn.loc.gov/2023018855

LC ebook record available at lcn.loc.gov/2023018856

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

randomhousebooks.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

ScoutAutomatedPrintCode

FIRST EDITION



Pásame el teléfono

“I can’t believe you called me six times for this today, Mari.

Abue is going to be fine.

Whether she evacuates or she stays.

She’s like an immortal Pokémon.

Oh my god. And you left me a voicemail?

I just saw the notification . . .

You are such a closeted boomer . . .

Well now that I know you’re alive, I’m gonna need a second to breathe.

I thought you had been kidnapped. And the police were calling me to demand some answers, since you have me saved as ‘ICE Psychopath’ in your phone.

Yes. Mom told me you still haven’t changed that.

Which is not only rude, by the way, but also impractical. Have you thought about that?

What’s gonna happen when you have an actual emergency one day?

You're gonna be like on your last breath, begging for help. And the cops won't be able to reach me because my phone's gonna be locked away in Mrs. Nelson's desk again for ringing during class.

Luciana Domínguez. Is that your phone?

Yes?

Give it. You can get it from me at the end of class.

Wait, it's Mari? This fucking bitch.

Luciana!

Sorry. It's just . . . my sister.

It was on loud because NO ONE EVER CALLS ME, DUDE.

So imagine my surprise when I get my phone back and see six missed calls, thinking that you're either dead or I'm being framed—just to call back and get your unbearable high-pitched voice on the line screaming about our grandmother!

Mm-hmm.

And it's really all or nothing with you, huh?

Because I hadn't heard a peep out of you since you went back to school.

Nope. Not a single word when I texted you being vulnerable, asking if it was weird that I was starting my senior year but was still scared of Mom.

I shouldn't be this afraid, but her eyes are so scary. Is that normal? Should I feel more confident?

Or during the important and personal milestone of Rihanna launching her Fenty Beauty line last week.

Ignore my texts about Mom, I'm over it. But can you send me \$30 though? It's urgent.

And now here you are.

Blowing up my phone while I'm trying to prepare for a hurricane.

Along with the underwhelming beginning of my impending adulthood.

Thank you.

No! Don't start asking 'how are you' now, bitch.

I needed you a month ago!

Whatever. You're lucky there's a storm coming. I don't have time to get into this.

So tell me, is your plan to cyberbully and harass Abue into evacuating with us, too? Cuz you're pretty good at that.

Oh, she's not listening or picking up your phone calls? Weird. You have the voice of an angel.

Okay, relax, lol.

Just text her that Jesus came to you in a dream and said there's a one-hundred-pound weight minimum for adults to get into heaven. So if she really wants to meet Princess Diana, she's gonna have to wait. Because it's not in her best interest to die right now at ninety-five pounds in a hurricane.

I am being serious, Mari? You know how Abue feels about Lady D.

Fine. But could you at least remind her that all the stores close up during hurricanes too? As the allegedly 'wiser,' more 'trust-worthy' one of us? I tried telling her myself, but she didn't believe me.

If you stay, you won't be able to buy anything, Abue. Not even at Marshalls.

Everything you say is a lie, Luciana.

You can't just decide that because I'm saying it in English.

Why not? It's the language of liars.

I promise you that the mall will be closed, dude. You won't be able to get in. No one is going to be here—just you and Hurricane Irma. So c'mon! They're saying she's going to be the worst storm of 2017. Go pack up your stuff and let's go.

No! I'm not a sheep.

Ew, Mari . . . Why are you crying?

Abue's going to be fine! She's not an idiot. She knows where all the shelters are, and Dad will be at the farm, only a few hours away.

Plus—she's still got like twelve hours left to change her mind. Mom said we're not leaving until tomorrow morning.

And you can even tell Abue that if she comes, I'll let her ride shotgun.

That way she can lean into the driver's seat and say, 'This isn't the way' to Mom like five hundred times.

She really loves doing that, Mari! It could help.

FINE. Then just call and confess that she needs to evacuate so you don't feel guilty over not being home! THERE. I SAID IT.

Oh, please. You're a horrible liar.

And for starters, it's obvious. We were invisible to you until Irma found us.

But now you desperately need Abue to stay safe, so you don't have to come back or feel guilty if something happens.

Since this is really all just about you and your need to control everything! Voilà!

I'm not as stupid as everyone thinks!

Why is Mari freaking out? Abue can make her own decisions. She's an adult?

She just cares, mi amor. She feels helpless from so far away.

Well she should 'care' more often then. Not just when the news says there's an emergency.

Sure, yeah, I'm joking, lol.

Just can't believe that I'll never make it to college myself.

Since I'm going to die driving the back roads of Florida, racing a tsunami to save our grandmother.

Next to our mother and our dog.

Mari—relax! I'm kidding and you know it. So stop pretending-crying and spare me the act.

You will get to escape the consequences of your actions once again, and we will all be okay. Including Rosy. And she's the only dog I know who's scared of clouds.

Yes, Mom and I tried convincing Abue to come with us all week! I promise.

We bombarded her from every angle possible: Facebook, WhatsApp, texts, and emails. Nightly FaceTimes on the iPad. Even some fake eHarmony promos. But she just wouldn't listen. To Mom, Dad, or me—her most perfect and precious grandchild.

I'm not leaving, Luciana.

Fine. Your choice. I'm tired of begging.

Though, of course, Mom then acted like Abue's refusal was somehow my fault. Since she's so used to you doing everything so perfectly and flawlessly for her.

No! Luciana! Get back on the phone.

Why? She's just being stubborn.

Because she's your grandmother. Try again.

UGH. Hello? Abue—it's me again. Your daughter is driving me crazy. Please don't leave me alone with her. They're saying this storm is going to get bad! That we really need to evacuate.

They always say that! Tell your mother that I'm too old and the drive is too long. And I read somewhere on the internet that senior citizens who evacuate are much more likely to get injured than those who stay. Can you imagine that?! Suffering in a hospital that's already falling apart? My girl, I'd rather be dead.

But you'll be with us!

Everything I need is here. Goodbye. They say this every year.

What about the six-foot storm surge? And the power outage?

Tell it to come.

Do you think that Abue won't evacuate because she wants to be on *Primer Impacto*, lol? The world's most depressing news show?

She's been watching it a lot lately while we're on the phone before she goes to bed.

Yes . . . and all they do is, like, show pictures of dead bodies on streets . . . Or run stories about dads trying to sell their daughters.

Or flash 'Breaking News' alerts about the kid in the neighborhood who's been chopping the heads off his pets.

Last time we were at her place, she even got in my head by saying, Luciana—look. Isn't that boy in your class?

No. Stop. You're gonna give me nightmares before I go to sleep.

I think you better call home and check on Rosy. It's not looking good.

I had to be like, Abue, c'mon man, doesn't this show make you sad? Why don't you watch something easier on the stomach all day? *It doesn't help that you like to watch it in the dark.*

No. Yo soy dura.

Omg. Do you not know how to change the channel?

But then she threw her spoon at me for speaking English again.

And even though she never aims, she still somehow always hits my face.

It's like some supernatural form of grandma physics . . .

Can you please look into that?

Smart enough to learn English but not smart enough to duck. Look at that.

Ow! Why did you throw that?

Because you think you're better than me.

I was asking a question?

You don't have to say it with so much pride!

And the torture didn't end there for me, Mari, oh no. So excuse me for not wanting to play your little 'Let's Tell Abue What To Do' game.

Because after Abue's mentally ill news show was over, she tried teaching me how to use her hair curlers again.

Please, no. I'm so sore from last time.

Yup. And I still couldn't get the twist right.

What the hell, Luciana? Even your wrists don't have rhythm?

And I wasn't allowed to leave, eat, or use the bathroom until I got it right.

It's almost midnight, dude. I have to go home.

No, you're sleeping here. Try again. Put my news show back on and let's go.

At least get me some water!

So in conclusion, you all need to leave her alone. Because you and Mom are forgetting who we're dealing with here. If Abue's mind is made up about something—she's holding on tight.

Remember when she had a broken toilet for a month? Because she wouldn't let anyone inside to fix it? Because she had

dyed her hair the wrong color and was waiting for it to grow out?

Exactly. The bitch is crazy.

Leave her be.

And besides . . . Mom said that Abue's been bringing up the butt job?

Yes. As in, she thinks that people with butt jobs can't run from hurricanes, lol.

Which would be wild. Because then all of Miami would really go underwater.

But didn't she get it done like two years ago?

Oh no, you're right. That was her waist.

Well then—there you have it. Your grandmother can't evacuate because she said that she needs to be sleeping in a specific position, in her specific bed, or her ass will pop.

Is that true, Abue?

Yes. It happened on Paraíso Inferno, season one.

Really? I thought the redhead's butt just gets infected?

No. Pay attention. That was season two.

So, AssGate is probably gonna be our final answer. And unfortunately, Abue is a grown woman who can do whatever she wants. So if she wants to buoy above water with her fake titties and ass when the hurricane hits, then that's fine. I'm sure she has her reasons.

You and Mom just need to stop trying to micromanage everything. You're like the type A twins from hell.

No wonder Abue doesn't want to come!

Look, I promise to check on her the entire drive tomorrow, okay? I love her too . . . I've just had a lot going on.

Mom asked me to sit in the garage and separate cans by expiration date when I got home from school.

I'm gonna cry.

Luciana, please. We're all tired. Just sort through the old food supplies. I don't want to buy new cans, they're horrible for us and the environment. But make sure to grab only the ones that haven't expired yet. And take your time. You don't want diarrhea on the side of the road from food we bought in 2005 for Hurricane Wilma. Read the dates carefully. Don't rush things like you do on your math tests.

Omg. Will I need a calculator? Pressure flares up my dyslexia.

And then after that, I had to drive to like four different supermarkets for a gallon of water.

Yes.

ONE GALLON OF WATER, Mari. Can you believe that?

Because everyone is fighting and hoarding supplies!

It's like survival of the freaking fittest at the grocery stores.

And you really have to send in your best fighter . . . But because you ditched us, I'm all this family has.

Why can't you or Dad come? I'm scared of old people.

Your father and I need to work as much as possible before the storm hits. Just go, Nana. We need your help.

I'm not built for Black Friday Hurricane Edition, Mom! I'm anemic!

Even though I badly wanted to be like, But can you explain to me again why you're so busy working, Mom? Because who the hell needs swimming lessons the days before a storm?! *Isn't it too late by then?*

No. I offer a hurricane discount. People love it.

However, speaking of things that don't make sense . . . has

Mom told you about the new neighborhood parents WhatsApp thread?

Yes. The Miami Princess Homeowners Association is already starting with their theatrics. They made a group chat to talk about all the precautions we need to be taking or we're going to hell.

Get your canned goods, donate to those in need, and sit down with your families to pray. That's all there is to it. Sin is especially tempting during difficult times. We must hold our loved ones close in God's light—it's the only way.

Mom. Are they talking about . . . the hurricane?

I'm not sure. Just ignore them.

Shouldn't they be making sure everyone has shutters?

Yes. But listen, you should really think about joining their youth group when we get back. They go on some incredible service trips! And it would look good on your college applications. Plus, it could be a great place for you to make new friends. A sort of . . . 'fresh start' for your senior year.

Why did you just use air quotes? And why would I join a youth group? I'm already eighteen.

Age is just a number, honey.

You're so lucky you're in D.C., dude.

I'd take ten winters to the face if it meant I never had to 'shelter-in-place' again with these fake evangelist intellectuals.

They're all about loving thy neighbor, yet the bigotry oozes from their pores!

Yes, Mari . . . They were literally DISTRAUGHT that gay people can adopt in Colombia now. I saw them arguing about it in that demonic chat.

Some poor earnest soul asked the group if gay men should be allowed to donate blood too now and, obviously, all hell broke loose.

I'm serious! Their responses were so absurd that I almost even said, Oh my god! I don't fucking get it! What's the actual problem here? Would you all rather those kids NOT have homes? Cuz it's not like your selfish asses are gonna do it—donate blood or adopt kids. You probably can't even afford it! And if God really hates gay people, why is his son bare-chested in a miniskirt getting pinned down to a cross? *These people are so confused.*

But when Mom saw me reading those messages, and she saw my face begin to contort, she snatched her phone back so fast and said, Never mind—that's enough. No more scrolling for you.

Lol. I know.

I was like, Copy that, Mother. I'll just stay in the closet forever. Just like you and your sicko friends want.

And what's worse is that those idiots have probably never even read the Bible! Because God is not the problem here . . . *It's their tiny little brains.*

Mom even tried telling me that YOU loved your 'church friends.'

I was like, Who? Mari Magdalene? Hoe of the East? No, thanks. I don't think so.

Mari only joined youth group because it was the one place she could sneak off and let that weirdo Alonso feel her boobs.

I said, that's enough! Go pack up Rosy's stuff. I can't find her harness.

That's because she doesn't have one! What reality are you living in?!

Unbelievable.

It's like she had blinders on your entire teenagehood. And instead, I get fucking binoculars.

But anyways, on top of bestowing her religious trauma on me, Mom's also been making us do these stupid YouTube video workouts every night before bed.

That's another luxury that you're missing out on.

Yes. She said that she read online somewhere that if we don't start 'stretching now' and 'preparing for our drive,' all our blood will stop flowing and our metabolisms will slow.

I don't think mine can get any slower.

Luciana, don't say things like that. This isn't a joke. Your health needs to be your top priority. When are you going to learn to take it seriously? It's extremely important that you get exercise!

Omg. You're obsessed with my body.

And did you know that her YouTube account name is Elena-Lifts600?

Cuz that shit gave me chills . . .

Yeah, so, we'll probably be on the side of the road, doing squats and downward dogs with Rosy, when we get a frantic call from Abue screaming that there's actually rain this time, and the U.S. Army is at her door.

They're the ones who got her to evacuate last time.

Elena? Hello? You need to get here. There are a bunch of men in the same outfit in my lobby. Tell them I don't want whatever they're selling.

That's the National Guard, Mom. Open up.

Ew, Mari. Yes? Abue's apartment obviously has shutters? We're not actually just leaving her here to die. Stop believing her dramatic-ass texts.

I swear! Dad installed those special rolling ones on her balcony when we dropped off supplies.

If Jaime gets to stay back with no problem, then why can't I?

Because unlike you, Abue, we don't live near the water. And he's not seventy-five! He's staying because he has to take care of the farm. Not because he wants to die playing with his makeup.

Oh—but I think you should know that when we were about to leave Abue's apartment, she made me grab the Publix groceries from her car and do the whole rebagging thing again.

Yup.

She had me put them all into individual Whole Foods bags before bringing them up.

Where do you even keep getting these bags from, dude? Are you ordering them online?

No questions. Just hurry up and stuff before anybody sees.

Sees what? That you're a normal person who shops at Publix? I'm not gonna do this for you every time!

So as you can tell, she's still very committed to her fabricated identity of old-money Russian heiress. I hope that brings you some peace . . .

Because she really wouldn't go through the trouble if she thought that she was dying anytime soon.

But while we're here—when is she going to learn that you can't just leave groceries in your car for hours?

Is that why she doesn't eat?

And they CLOSED the Whole Foods near her place, Mari.

So does she honestly think that the neighbors believe she's driving more than twenty minutes now for organic lemons?

That bitch won't even walk outside to get the mail!

Abue. I don't think you can keep this façade up for much longer. Just logistically.

Listen to me. You have to keep people on their toes in this world, Nana. The second they think they know you, you die.

No, Mari, lol. Take a deep breath.

Abue has no 'secret plan' with not evacuating. Stop conspiring with your sorority sisters and think clearly for a second.

And even if she did—it would be for the same reason that she has me stuffing bootleg Whole Foods bags!

Yes! She just needs to be seen as glamorous and beautiful at all times. It's that simple.

She's probably only worried that running from a hurricane won't give her that.

Let her live.

Oh, please. You of all people should understand.

You're the same way.

Abue just wants people to say . . . Let me tell you about this crumbling building . . . and the DAZZLING old woman that wouldn't leave from the fourteenth floor. Ouuuuuu you should have seen her hair! Long, black, and brittle, like it was running away from itself. And high, skinny cheekbones that didn't let her talk to anybody. With one lonely brown eye—clouded with cataracts but still winking at you—on the left.

The way she slammed doors in your face was sexy!

But it wouldn't even matter to her, you know.

Whether she lived or died.

Because even if Irma ravished the whole state—at least Abue would still be beautiful.

And that was the point.

I know.

Incredible AND depressing, right?

Does it sound like you yet?

And then at her funeral, she'd want us all talking about how she wouldn't leave . . . How she knew this storm would kill her.

How she called it her welcome party to the neighborhood!

The quince she never got!

Cuz how much you wanna bet she'd even be knocking on Home Depot's door when the storm hits?

Trying to get in?

To find a new faucet head or doorknob.

Because the one she has now 'makes her look cheap' and she knows it.

She's been saying it for years.

What will they say! *No no no, dios mío.* The rescue teams!

When they find her!

When they call all the sisters she hates and the kids she's ignored, she needs them to say, HO-LA, we found your mother's body, ma'am. But don't worry. She is so beautiful, so striking, and my god, her home—she must have been an empress."



a novel

SYLVIA'S SECOND ACT

Hillary
Yablon

VIKING
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com

Copyright © 2024 by Hillary R. Georgaris
Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

A Pamela Dorman Book/Viking

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Yablon, Hillary, author.

Title: Sylvia's second act : a novel / Hillary Yablon.

Description: [New York] : Pamela Dorman Books/Viking, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023033690 (print) | LCCN 2023033691 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780593493618 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593493625 (ebook)

ISBN 9780593832240 (international edition)

Subjects: LCGFT: Humorous fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3625.A335 S95 2024 (print) | LCC PS3625.A335 (ebook) |

DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20230929

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023033690>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023033691>

Printed in the United States of America
\$PrintCode

DESIGNED BY MEIGHAN CAVANAUGH

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

One

I admit it. I have fantasies. Of course I do. Who doesn't?

If I were to make a list of my own fantasies, the ones that pop into mind would be the following:

To be a runner. I turned sixty-three last month; I'm sure my body would be in for quite the shock. But, boy, would I just love to wake up and pull on a pair of those adorable running shorts I see the girls in these days. I actually thought about getting into it after my daughter, Isabel, joined the cross-country team in high school. I thought we'd go for mother-daughter runs, but somehow things were always too busy. Izzy had a million activities. I was always in the car, driving her somewhere, like all the other Connecticut housewives.

I used to fantasize about leaving Connecticut. Even just for a night. Taking the train into Manhattan and trying one of those "hot new places" people were always taking about. Having a glass of wine at the bar and then . . .

Okay, the truth is that I fantasized about that almost every day after Izzy left for college. Now I fantasize about going back there and leaving this dreadful Florida retirement community my husband, Louis, insisted we move to. Boca Beach Gables, BBG for short. Don't get me wrong. It's very nice. Very pretty, very upscale, very pink. But I hate the sun. I hate the humidity. I hate the way the days feel stretched out and empty. I have never felt so alone.

I fantasize about what it would have been like if, instead of marrying my husband right after college, I'd had a career abroad, somewhere vibrant. Like London.

I fantasize about taking a bat and swinging it in Belinda Teller's Botoxed face. That may be because Belinda is currently sitting on top of my husband with no clothes on. She is facing me. Because I am an avid fan of *Sex and the City* (I've seen it from start to finish six times), I know that Belinda is in reverse cowgirl position.

For a moment, I fantasize I'm in reverse cowgirl with Marcus, our spin instructor. That's the best thing I can say about BBG—their staff is excellent. Marcus is gorgeous. I pretend I don't know how to adjust the bike seat so he'll help me. I can almost feel his hands on my lower back right now . . .

Shit. I must have gotten caught up in this fantasy because I don't hear Louis and Belinda trying to get through to me.

“. . . Sylvia!” Louis is calling. “Jesus Christ, Sylvia! Say something.”

But I'm frozen. I can't move my mouth. So instead, I look to the left and catch my reflection in the mirror above the dresser. To be honest, I think I look quite good. As much as I hate it, the Florida sun has given my fair skin some color. And I've just gone to the hairdresser. She convinced me to go a little more beachy and added highlights to my shoulder-length hair.

I'm wearing the linen pants and cotton blouse ensemble that has

become my uniform down here. I keep telling myself it's classy and functional but deep down I feel boring and frumpy. I love clothes. But there's something about shopping in South Florida that makes me feel old. Like I'm one step closer to white sneakers and track pants.

I run a hand through my hair and frown. Where was I? Right. I'm standing in the bedroom of my ocean view condo staring at Belinda Teller's naked body. She is now sitting on the bed *next* to my husband instead of on top of him. Louis has the sheets around himself.

Typical. He's always been selfish.

"Oh my god, Sylvia. This isn't what you think," Belinda says as she shivers a bit.

"Oh, that's a relief," I say. "Because I thought you were having sex with my husband. But maybe you're just playing bridge. Only with no clothes. And no cards."

Belinda blinks. I can't stop staring at her enormous boobs. They're quite perky and, from what she told us at last month's Ladies' Wine Night, freshly redone by the best surgeon in South Florida.

"How long are you planning to sit there naked?" I ask.

"It's just . . . I'm so sorry, Sylvia. But would you mind?" Belinda's voice trails off and I follow her eyeline and look down. I'm standing on her bra. Instinctively, I bend down and pick it up. It looks like a small tent. I toss it to her.

"Thanks," Belinda says as she puts on the bra. Naturally, it's sheer, and somehow her nipples look even bigger beneath the black lace.

"You do the Brazilian?" I have no control over what comes out of my mouth. It gets worse in stressful situations. Plus, Belinda is now standing up and I have a full frontal view. "I ask because I was watching the episode of *Sex and the City* where Carrie can't decide what she thinks of men who want a completely bare pussy."

Louis looks positively scandalized. “Sylvia!”

“What? I can’t say pussy? You’re the one having sex with a woman you know I hate.”

“You hate me?” Belinda looks surprised. “I thought we were friends.”

I want to hit her. But instead, I glare. “Get out.”

“You’re right! I’m sorry! I just, um . . . I just don’t know know where my clothes are.”

Of course she doesn’t. As if on reflex, I drop to my knees and start looking under the bed for her clothes.

Louis crouches down next to me. “Sylvia.” He swallows. “I’m so sorry. You don’t have to do this.”

“Just help me find her damn clothes.” My voice is muffled as I flatten myself on my stomach and squirm farther under the bed.

Louis sighs and gets up. From my vantage point, I see his and Belinda’s feet padding around the room. “Louis,” Belinda whispers. I don’t hear what else she says, but I see Louis’s feet leave the room.

It’s dark under the bed. The carpet is gunmetal gray—hardly my first choice—and I can barely see anything. My arms are outstretched and I’m swimming them slowly over the floor. My hands finally hit something that is lacy and obscenely small. “I think I’ve found your underpants,” I call as I slither back out from under the bed.

Before getting up, I glance over my shoulder. The coast is clear. I covertly turn Belinda’s thong inside out so I can see the label printed on the waistband. Size zero.

That bitch.

I drag myself to my feet and hand Belinda her panties. “All right. Now get out.”

Belinda pulls them on and nods. “I just need my dress. Or if you want me gone, maybe I can borrow something of yours?”

“We both know my clothes won’t fit you.”

“Don’t be silly! We’re practically the same size.”

“I’m six inches taller and thirty pounds heavier.” My voice is flat.

Belinda waves a hand as though we’re just girlfriends at lunch fishing for compliments. “You’ve got a gorgeous figure. I’d die to be tall and athletic like you.”

She’s lying. She loves being tiny and feminine. I am sick with jealousy over her flat stomach. The last thing I need to see is her swimming in my clothes. And I’d sooner die than watch her walk out in one of Louis’s big T-shirts like this was some frat house.

I swallow. “Let’s just find your dress. Where do you think it is?”

“On the ceiling fan.” Louis says as he walks in from the living room. He’s still only wearing his boxers and looks short of breath. “I tried using a flyswatter to get it down. But the dress is really tangled up there.”

I blink. “I’m sorry. Did you say the ceiling fan?”

Louis nods. I blink again. How did I miss that on my way into the bedroom? And, seriously? Just how passionate was this lovemaking session? Louis has a bad back. Since when did he turn into a sexual acrobat? I must still be staring at them, because Louis clears his throat and finally says, “I may have to call building maintenance to get it down.”

A shot of humiliation jolts through my body. “Louis, I can take a lot. But I would rather be set on fire than have Derek from building maintenance come up here to retrieve Belinda’s dress from our ceiling fan. Get me a goddamn hanger.”

Belinda’s eyes widen. But Louis is stone-faced. The only other time he’s seen me like this is when I was in labor. He quickly obeys, grabs a hanger from the closet, and gives it to me.

Mustering whatever ashes of dignity I have left, I square my shoulders and walk into the living room.

Sure enough, just above our couch, Belinda's sundress is tangled around the one purchase I bought for our prefurnished condo: the Big-Ass Fan. It's really called that. They're very chic. Oversize, hand-carved wood. Gives our place a Bali-like feel. Now, of course, it's more a brothel-like feel.

Belinda and Louis—both of whom are still in their goddamn underwear—stare as I gingerly step onto the armrest of the couch to reach the dress.

"Careful, Sylvie," Louis says.

"Do not call me that. Do not ever fucking call me that again," I say through clenched teeth as I try to angle the hanger just right so that I can pull down the dress.

I miss.

I take a breath and steady myself as I fling the hanger forward again. I grab hold of the dress and slowly untwist it from the fan's blades.

Louis is impressed. "You got it! Wow!"

For a moment, I'm quite impressed with myself, when—

I fall off the couch. Belinda and Louis rush over. "I'm fine," I say as I rub my leg. "Nothing's broken."

"Let me get you some ice," Belinda says as she quickly scoops up her dress. I close my eyes a moment as I hear *click-clack, click-clack, click-clack . . .*

I open my eyes. I look up and stare at Belinda rushing through my apartment in high-heeled sandals. I lean my head back against the couch and start to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Louis asks.

I point to Belinda as she wraps ice in a hand towel and heads toward us.

"Look at her," I wheeze. "She's like an aging stepmother in porn."

Louis glances up as Belinda comes trotting over in her heels, bra, and panties.

I'm laughing and laughing. Belinda glances at Louis. "Did she hit her head?"

This makes me laugh harder. Belinda looks truly worried as she kneels in front of me to give me the ice. Her massive bosom presses against me. God, these boobs. I cannot get away from them.

And so I give in. I cup her breasts. "Oh!" She jerks backward, shocked.

But I don't let go. I squeeze them like I'm shopping for fruit. "Wow," I murmur. "Much more natural than I thought."

Belinda is so flustered that she jumps up and puts on her dress as quickly as possible.

She then grabs her purse and runs out of the apartment.

When the door slams, I look at Louis. My voice is deadpan. "If I'd known she was homophobic, I would've felt her up sooner."

Louis just stares. "You sure you're okay?"

"No, Louis. I'm not okay. I just molested my husband's mistress."

"She's not my mistress, Sylvia. It was this one time. I swear. Let me explain—"

"Get dressed first."

Louis looks down at his boxers and then quickly heads into the bedroom. I massage my sore leg for a moment.

Louis returns wearing pants. As he hastily pulls on a shirt, I lean my head back against the couch and take him in. He's a good-looking man. Six feet, two inches. Daily golf and tennis have kept him trim. His hair went gray twenty years ago, but he's still got plenty of it. I can see why other women want to have sex with him.

Finally dressed, he looks at me and exhales. "Sylvia, I'm sorry. So, so sorry."

“Do you love her?”

“Of course not. This really was an accident.”

Why do men say such stupid things? This whole situation is just so pathetic that it’s almost funny. I start to laugh again until I realize that maybe it’s me who’s pathetic. Louis and I haven’t made love in . . . I’ve lost track. Have we done it since moving down here? I’m racking my brain, trying to figure it out, when I hear Louis’s voice cutting in and out . . .

“. . . and so when I found out we lost it all . . .”

Maybe the first week? We must have. How could I not know this?

“. . . and I think I’m in shock, Sylvia. Don’t worry, though. We’re paid through our dues until the end of May down here. So I’ll figure something out. The lawyers said . . .”

“What?” I look at Louis. I realize he’s talking about something important.

“I said that the lawyers think they’ll be able to recover some of our savings. It just may take a little while.”

“What lawyers? What are you talking about?” I’m rubbing my forehead.

“I just told you, Sylvia. My retirement account was mismanaged by the investment firm I hired last year.”

“What does that mean? I thought we chose a low-risk plan for our portfolio.”

“We did,” he says as he reddens. “But I took a chance. I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d be nervous. But the returns were out of this world. And their reputation was great and . . . shit. I screwed up.” He looks down.

“Louis,” I say very slowly. “Is all of our money gone?”

He nods, his face dark and heavy. “I just found out last week. I’ve been scrambling to see how bad it is and I remembered Belinda had

a big position at J.P. Morgan before she retired. And so I was talking to her about things and she introduced me to a lawyer and then I guess I was feeling pretty broken and one thing led to another . . .” His voice trails off.

“So let me get this straight. We lost everything. Belinda gave you a shoulder to cry on and an attorney to call. And that—accidentally—led to sex?”

He nods. “Don’t worry. I’m going to make sure we’re okay.”

I look at him for a long time. I know I should feel sad and probably a little scared. But all I feel is a deep, deep relief. I know exactly what I’m going to do.

“Louis,” I say. “I’m leaving.”

Two

After I left my condo, I headed straight to Evie's. She took one look at my face and insisted we start drinking immediately. Evie's my only real friend at BBG. We met my second week there and instantly bonded. That was only a year ago, but it seems like we've known each other forever. She and I have the same birthday. She just turned seventy. Apparently she's turned seventy for the last few years. But I pretend not to know that. What do I care? For a woman who uses a cane—she has arthritis in her knees—one would be a fool to underestimate her. When her husband, Henry, was alive, he used to call her the General. That makes me think they had a good marriage.

“What did they feel like?” Evie asks as she takes a long sip of her cosmo. We're at Moonlight's, Boca's trendiest bar. “Were they hard? Semi-hard? Did you squeeze them or just stroke them like petting a cat?”

She's talking, of course, about Belinda's boobs. I ponder my answer as though trying to describe the meaning of life. "I gave them a good squeeze," I finally say. "And then I just kind of held on to them."

Evie throws her head back and laughs. A group of people nearby turns and looks. It's 5:00 p.m. and happy hour is in full swing. We're lucky to have gotten this booth. But then again, we've been here since 2:30, when the place was mostly empty except for the dedicated alcoholics at the bar.

I finish my drink—maybe my third?—and let out a long breath. Evie watches me carefully and then turns serious. She runs a hand through her short, blond shag. People often mistake her for Jane Fonda, and I know this thrills her. She has a certain glamour that's hard to describe. Even her cane is somehow stylish rather than geriatric.

"Sylvia, I'm sorry this happened. But what are you going to do?"

Before I can answer, a new waiter approaches. He's young, in his late twenties, and handsome in the way that everyone in their twenties is. At least to me. "Hello, ladies. Your server, Cassie, just clocked out. I have the pleasure of taking over your table. Another round?"

Evie nods. "You bet. That's why we Ubered here."

"You Ubered? That's amazing."

"What's amazing about it? That two old ladies know how to work a smartphone?" Evie's eyes narrow.

"No," the waiter stammers. "I mean, it's just so great that you're so hip and . . ." I feel sorry for him.

But Evie cracks a smile. "I'm just fucking with you, dear."

Now the waiter's eyes go wide. He stands there, not sure what to do. Evie has that effect on people.

Evie pats his arm. "Go bring us our drinks." He nods, looking dazed, and walks away.

I laugh, grateful for this light moment. “What would I do without you, Evie?”

“I’m more interested, Sylvia, in what you’re going to do now that you’ve discovered your husband is a cheating shit who lost all of your money.”

I let out a breath and look at the ceiling. The truth is, whatever relief I felt before has given way to a deep panic.

But I try to stay calm. “Maybe things aren’t that bad,” I finally say. “I don’t know what’s going to happen with my marriage, but financially speaking, Louis said he would sort things out. And it’s not like we’re actually broke. The hair salon took my credit card today. I’ve had no trouble at the grocery store or getting gas for the car. So, really, it just sounds bad. But it’s all going to be fine.”

Evie shakes her head. “Get your head out of your ass. Things are bad. But things were bad before. You were stuck in a life you hate.”

“That’s not . . . entirely true.” But even as I say it, I know Evie is right. My life is a mess. My husband makes me sick. We have no money. Our credit cards will eventually run out. And I have no idea how much cash—if any—is left in our account. My eyes fill with tears.

“Oh, Sylvia,” Evie says as I begin to cry.

“I just don’t know how I could have been so stupid,” I sob. “Louis always handled the investing. But I paid the bills and kept track of our budget until he retired and we moved down here. He transferred everything online and it just seemed easier to let him handle things. He’s an accountant after all!” The tears are pouring hot and fast now. “I’m such a cliché. I’m one of those stupid women you see on a miniseries and don’t feel sorry for because you secretly think what’s happened is their fault.”

“That’s not true.” Evie rubs my arm as she speaks.

I put my head in my hands and weep. The same people nearby turn and look at us. I start hiccupping. I’ve always been an ugly crier. Of course this is also the moment the handsome young waiter returns with our drinks. He slips them wordlessly onto our table.

Evie hands me my cosmo. “Sylvia, there’s a silver lining here: it’s the kick in the ass you need to get your life in order.”

“Kick in the ass?” I moan as I gulp my drink. “More like a bullet to the head.” I finally get control of my breathing and dry my eyes with some Kleenex I’ve dug out of my purse.

Evie takes my hand in hers. I’m surprised by the intensity of her grip. “A bullet to the head is cancer or ALS or finding out your child overdosed on some designer drug you’ve never even heard of.”

I stare at my friend. I know she’s talking about her son, and she never talks about her son.

I swallow. “Evie, I—”

“My point, Sylvia,” Evie says as she cuts me off, “is that you’re at a fork in the road. There’s two ways to go. Drown in self-pity or use this opportunity to take control of your life. I’d kill to be sixty-three again. You have so much time ahead of you and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let you waste it.”

I’ve never heard her talk like this. It concerns me. “Evie, you have time, too. You’re very youthful. You Uber!”

But Evie looks down at the table. She folds a cocktail napkin in thirds, drawing the crease down tight. She then stares at her hands a moment. I’ve never heard her play, but apparently she was a brilliant piano player. Her fingers are still long and graceful. But the skin is thin and wrinkled, crisscrossed with time.

“You can stay on my sofa for now. You’ve had a terrible shock. But

then you will rise like the strong woman you are and conquer the day. Maybe you'll travel the world. See France and Argentina and New Zealand."

I take another sip of my drink. "I've always wanted to travel," I confess. "Louis never liked to. He hates to fly. And he hates hotels. Who hates hotels? All those fresh towels and little bottles of shampoo. We were supposed to go to the Amalfi Coast before we moved down here. But Louis had a nightmare that our plane crashed, so he canceled the trip and we went to the Jersey Shore instead."

I push my hair out of my face and think about how angry I was that day. I'd spent three months learning Italian. My daughter, Isabel, helped me download an app onto my phone. I was getting quite good.

I can feel myself getting all hot and furious again. My eyes fill with fresh tears. I finish my drink. As if on cue, our waiter brings another round. "On me," he says as he smiles at me. "I hate to see a beautiful woman cry." Evie nods approvingly as he walks away.

I blink back my tears. I like being called beautiful. Even if it's by someone younger than my daughter who's aiming for a good tip. I pick up my drink.

"Wait," Evie says. She then holds up her glass to toast. "To seeing the world. You are a free woman with your health and a passport."

I nod. That's true. I renewed my passport for Italy. It's crisp and official-looking. I've been keeping it with my jewelry because I like to look at it on special occasions. I take a long sip of my drink and, ignoring the fact that I have no money, I get lost in a fantasy. I am on a jumbo jet. I'm wearing one those casually elegant travel outfits I read about in *Vogue*—a lightweight cashmere sweater, Donna Karan trousers, ballet flats. I have *The New York Times* peeking out of my Goyard bag. I've just misted moisturizing spray over my face because

everyone knows cabin air is drying. The stewardess brings me champagne and I say, “Thank you, darling.”

“Sylvia.” Evie’s voice cuts into my reverie and I realize I’m drinking from a now empty glass. Wow. That one went down fast. I’m a little dizzy.

“Are you okay?” Evie looks concerned. But I nod. I’m better than okay. I’m traveling around the world. I feel fabulous. I feel first-class. I feel free.

I vomit.

WELL, THERE’S CERTAINLY something youthful about tossing one’s cookies in a bar. It’s the next morning and I’m lying on Evie’s sofa staring up at the ceiling. Thank god she doesn’t have a fan.

I gingerly sit up. I’m not sure what hurts more—my pounding head or my throbbing back. Or my ego. I cringe and curse the fact that despite my alarming level of inebriation, my memory of last night is shamefully intact.

It was like no one had ever seen a person throw up in a bar before. Well, maybe no one’s seen someone my age do it.

“Sylvia,” Evie calls. I hear her cane lightly tap against the floor as she enters the living room. She wears a kimono robe over her pajamas and looks way too fabulous for having just spent the night drinking. Then again, we were kicked out of the bar before 6:00 p.m., so I suppose she got a good rest.

“Evie,” I moan. “How on earth are you not hungover?”

“I’m a WASP, dear. I can handle my liquor.”

I force myself up to a full sitting position and run my hand over the silk pajamas Evie leant me. Evie sits in the chair next to the couch and turns on the TV. It’s only 5:30 a.m., but she has Max, so she

easily queues up an episode of *Sex and the City* for us. The opening credits always cheer me up. I start bobbing my head in rhythm. But the movement makes me queasy. The morning sun is just beginning to peek its way through the curtains.

“How’s your head?” Evie asks as she hands me a glass of water and two Alka-Seltzer tablets.

“It hurts. As does my stomach. And I cannot stop these waves of humiliation.” I drop the tablets into the glass and watch the water fizz.

“You had good reason to drown your sorrows. The bouncer thought so, too.”

I wince. Jesus. Who knew they even had bouncers in Boca? But as soon as I barfed, a bouncer came over and carried me out so the waiter and bussers could clean up.

“He was very nice,” I concede.

She pauses the episode of SATC and turns to me, nodding. “He ferried you out like a princess. I can’t believe he actually knew who Belinda was.”

“I know,” I say, and recall how in a mortified, drunken stupor, I told the bouncer everything. While Evie called our Uber, he kindly sat with me on the pavement and said he’d seen Belinda there before, looking for men.

Evie shakes her head. “Belinda’s poor husband. I keep trying to figure out if she cheated on him before he got Alzheimer’s.”

“You and Henry knew them when they moved down here. Were they happy?”

“Hard to tell. Edward was a bit of a blowhard and Belinda was always Belinda. Botox and boobies.”

Evie and I sit in silence for a moment. All at once, I feel sorry for Belinda and ashamed of myself. It must be awful seeing one’s hus-

band suffer like that. Should I have been more evolved? Instead of forcing Belinda out of my apartment, should I have taken her aside and said in a compassionate but firm voice, “Belinda, while this doesn’t excuse your behavior, I know you must be grieving the illness of your own husband and that’s why you were in bed with mine”? What would Jesus have done? Of course, I’m Jewish. But I suppose Jesus was, too.

Evie seems to read my mind. “Sylvia,” she says. “Belinda may be having a rough time of it. But she doesn’t get a free pass just because her husband is sick. And nothing changes the fact that Louis cheated. You still have to move forward.”

I sigh. I know she’s right. “But first can we finish our episode?”

Evie hits play on the remote. SATC starts up again. We lean in and escape our lives as Carrie, Samantha, Miranda, and Charlotte discuss cunnilingus over brunch.

Three

I left Evie's and am now sitting on the floor in my condo next to the bed—I can't bring myself to sit on the actual bed—and stare at my passport in my jewelry box. I bring it to my nose. I love the way it smells. So fresh and crisp. I put the jewelry box and passport in a small tote bag and zip it up. My big suitcase is open next to me on the floor. I'm nearly finished packing and I'm trying to sort through my magazines. I keep them in a bin next to my bed. There's *Vogue*, *Town & Country*, *Elle*, *W*, and a random assortment of European fashion magazines. I love to get lost in the glossy pages. Sometimes I use a magnifying glass when I read them. Louis always made fun of me. I thumb through my pile and put just five of my favorites into my suitcase and continue packing. There's not much more to do. I'd gotten rid of most my winter clothes when we moved down here because we knew the condo would be considerably smaller than

our old house. And who needs scarves and gloves and winter coats in Florida? Isabel and Bunny—Izzy’s mother-in-law—took what they wanted and then I donated the rest to a women’s shelter.

Hmm. I wonder if it’s cold up north yet. I let my eyes blur and can almost see the apricot-hued leaves flutter in the autumn wind. I can’t help but yearn for one of my cozy sweater-coats and find myself checking the weather back in Connecticut on my phone when I get a text message. It’s from Louis. *Is it okay if I’m early?*

I make a face. I had asked him to please be out of the condo between 1:00 and 4:00. I figured it would be easy because he has his weekly tennis match and then beers with the guys. But I glance at the time and see it’s only 2:15.

I type back, *How early?*

He responds right away. *Now?*

I feel a rush of irritation. I don’t respond for a moment. Another text message dings. *I’m standing outside our door.*

I grit my teeth and get up. I walk briskly through the condo and go to the front door. I open it. Louis is holding a dozen tulips. “Hi.”

I cross my arms. “What happened to your match?”

“I skipped it. Instead, I went for a long walk and thought about how much I love you. Your favorite.” He holds out the bouquet.

I stare at the gorgeous flowers. They look expensive. “I thought we were broke.”

“I stole them from a funeral home.”

Despite myself, I laugh. Louis has always been funny. He looks me in the eye. “I’m so sorry, Sylvia. So, so sorry.”

“You can’t just bring me flowers and expect everything to be okay.”

“What else can I do? Rob a jewelry store? Hold up a chocolate shop?”

“Oh, Louis. This isn’t a flowers and earrings and truffles kind of thing.”

Louis shifts on his feet. I realize he’s still in the hallway and step aside so he can enter the condo. After I close the door, we both just stand in the foyer a moment. I finally reach for the flowers. “Well, these shouldn’t go to waste.” I head to the kitchen to put them in water.

Louis follows me.

“Are you really packed up?”

I nod. He lets out a breath. “You staying at Evie’s?”

I nod again. Louis looks at me. “So I basically got flowers for myself?”

I shrug. “I guess I could take them to Evie’s.”

“How much does she hate me?”

“If it makes you feel better, I don’t think she ever really liked you.”

He smiles sadly. “I know. How come? Everyone likes me.”

It’s true. Louis is one of those people. “I think she knew that things were off between us.”

Louis shakes his head and puts a hand over his heart. “That’s not true, Sylvia. I love you. I’ve loved you every day for forty-three years.”

“We’ve only been married forty-one years.”

“Yes, but we dated for two years before that.”

Louis looks triumphant. I raise a brow. There’s a passion in his voice that I haven’t heard in a long time.

“What can I do to make this right? Because I’m not giving up. You are everything to me. I know I screwed up. I thought I was doing a good thing with the money and I’d surprise you but then it was a disaster and I got scared. I should’ve told you the truth. Instead, I

tried to fix it without you finding out and that led to an even worse decision. That day with Belinda was a one-off. Temporary insanity.”

I’m still standing in the kitchen and lightly hold the countertop for support. Louis has said everything I could ever want to hear. He sounds passionate and honest. My head whirls.

Louis comes closer and gently takes my hand in his. “And I’m not an idiot, Sylvia. I know you’re not happy here. I forced us to move. I honestly thought it would be great. That you’d love it.”

“But I told you point-blank that I didn’t want to move.”

“I thought if you tried it, you’d change your mind.”

“How come you canceled our trip to Italy?”

“What?”

“You knew how much I wanted to go. You knew how much I planned. But you just canceled it like it was nothing.”

Louis looks thrown. “Why are we talking about that?”

“Because that trip to Italy is a metaphor for everything that’s happened. It’s like I’m an afterthought and you do whatever you want. You went behind my back and lost our money. You cheated on me. Sure, you’re saying all the right things now. But how can I believe any of it?”

Louis’s jaw twitches slightly. He opens his mouth, then closes it. Something inside me flinches.

Is he—

Is he *annoyed* with me?

I narrow my eyes. I know this man too well. He’s biting his cheek and looking over my shoulder. Which is exactly what he does when he’s trying not to lose his temper.

I pull my hand away from him. The sudden movement surprises him. He clears his throat and speaks slowly. “Look, Sylvia. I hear

you. You feel taken for granted. And I apologize for that. But things will be better.”

“I want a divorce.” The words are out of my mouth before I can even think. But as soon as I say it, I know it’s the truth.

“Don’t be stupid,” Louis snaps. “We can’t get divorced. We can’t afford it right now.”

“Then I’ll wait until we can. For now, I’m moving out.”

For information on additional debuts, the inside scoop on our upcoming titles, giveaways, and more, visit us at PenguinRandomHouseLibrary.com and BorrowReadRepeat.com.

Join Our Network: /PRHLibrary



Penguin
Random House
LIBRARY MARKETING

Re@d
BORROW. READ. REPEAT.

Content in this sampler is excerpted by permission of Penguin Random House. All rights reserved.

No part of this excerpt booklet may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.