ALAFAIR BURKE

THE NOTE

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gpsr.requests@easproject.com

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THE NOTE

Prologue

It was meant to be a harmless prank. Not even a prank, not initially. An inside joke, only for the three of them. But now she was locking her apartment door behind two departing police officers.

She had managed to sound appropriately earnest but unworried when they began asking questions. After all, why should May Hanover, of all people, be nervous around police? May was the good girl, always. The one who only needed to be told once by a teacher to open a book to a specific page. The teenager who drove strictly within the limits of her learner's permit. Even her pug, Gomez, seemed to understand at an instinctive level why he needed to break away from his neighbor buddies to ride the building's service elevator while they strutted brazenly with their humans through the lobby.

May, simply put, was a rule follower. A rule enforcer, in fact. It was a trait that had helped her succeed in life, but, as she had learned, could also lead to trouble.

Josh emerged from the bedroom where he'd gone to give her privacy when the police arrived. Gomez waddled slightly behind him. "Was that about Roland Shaw?"

Shaw was the man she'd convicted in her final in-person

trial as an assistant district attorney after he was found breaking into his next victim's apartment. "How'd you know?" Could a question be a lie? That one probably counted. So many lies since she'd gotten home yesterday from her long weekend in the Hamptons.

"That was a major case for you. I recognized the big guy from the news."

The trial was before she and Josh had found themselves suddenly living together. Before they were engaged. The media coverage consisted of two small articles in the *Post*, including a photograph of a defiant-looking May flanked by two detectives in the courthouse hallway—one of them the "big guy" Josh recognized. Whereas May was obsessed with all things crime-related—in her job, the news, truth or fiction—Josh found it all, quote, "dark and depressing." But Josh was interested in all things May-related. Of course he had followed the coverage.

"The DA's Office got an inquiry from another jurisdiction and needed to clear something up," she said. Misleading, but technically true.

"They couldn't just call you?" he asked.

"Actually, he called, but I didn't see the message." That one was a full-on lie. "Guess he's training a new guy and wanted a change of scenery."

"Well, I'm glad they were quick. I really wanted a Negroni but thought the sound of a cocktail shaker might be inadvisable while you were in official law enforcement mode."

"Another reason why you should stir," she said.

"I like what I like."

"Make two? I'm getting back into my comfy clothes."

She called Lauren once she was alone in the bedroom.

"Hey there, woman. We were just saying we miss you."

"Yes, we miss you!" Kelsey called out in the background. "Come back here right now. It's boring without you."

May could hear a few drinks' worth of enthusiasm in Kelsey's voice. "You're clearly having a miserable time. Absolutely suffering." She felt a knot form in her sternum as she steeled herself to explain why she was calling. "I don't even know how to say this, but the police are probably going to call you. Both of you."

"What? How would they even know about us?" Lauren asked.

"They came to my apartment. They asked who I was with. I didn't have a choice. They have your names. And your phone numbers."

"How? Were there cameras or something?"

"No, it was because of me. I'm so sorry."

What had she gone and done? No one was supposed to know about any of their stupidity. And now something really, really bad was going to happen—she could feel it. Something she couldn't control. She wanted to open her mouth wide to scream—to scream impossibly loudly again, like last time.

PART I

THE BEST TRIP EVER

1

Six Days Earlier

May stood before her open closet, finding a reason to hate everything in it. Her clothes consisted of either suits and sheath dresses or jeans, tees, and hoodies. She was utterly unequipped for a girls' weekend at the beach.

A few years ago, everyone seemed to be purging their belongings—dumping anything that didn't "bring them joy." May had quietly judged them all. To her, the act of finding happiness through decluttering was an indulgence for people who had too much time on their hands and enough money to spend on custom organizers at the Container Store. Now that she was staring down all her sad clothes, she was pining for a little Kondo energy.

She decided her good old reliable black shirt-dress would work if she paired it with a colorful bangle and some cute strappy sandals. She rolled it neatly before slipping it into the carry-on bag she had flopped open on her side of the bed. Resting next to the bag was Josh, his back against the headboard, the reading glasses he only recently admitted needing perched low on his nose. Gomez was curled in a tight ball next to him.

For the first four years of that dog's life, she had trained him to stay off the furniture. All that changed

during the lockdown, when he'd been glued next to at least one of them 24/7 for more than a year straight. No going back now.

She noticed that Josh was grimacing as he read.

"That gross?" she asked. Josh was a product manager for one of the world's largest makers of personal care products. Tonight's homework was a report on emerging trends in the personal hygiene market.

"Reviewing a complete list of places to use full-body deodorant. Want to hear?"

"Nope. People are disgusting."

Josh set the report aside on the nightstand and replaced it with the memoir he was reading by the lead singer of one of their favorite bands. They'd splurged on good tickets to see them live, the very first performance at Madison Square Garden after the world began to reopen. The date landed within those heavenly few weeks after vaccination appointments were plentiful, but before the arrival of the new vocabulary of *variants, breakthrough cases,* and *boosters*—when they believed that life was finally back to normal.

A few protesters showed up at the Garden, mocking them as sheep for complying with the venue's vax requirement. The guy in front of them had heckled back. "*Baaah,* motherfuckers. We sheep are going to dance our asses off while you idiots sweat outside."

May cried when the band broke into the first chorus. *It's times like these you learn to live again.*

Two years later, everyone else seemed fine. They were living again. But May?

May felt like she was still learning.

*

"You and your suitcase burritos." Josh smiled at the growing pile of compressed clothing bundles in her bag.

"Oh shoot," she said, immediately rethinking her black-dress choice. "I'm pretty sure I wore this the last time Lauren was in town. Does that sound right? When she had that gig at Lincoln Center?"

"Let me check my annal chronicling your historic wardrobe decisions across time." He pretended to reach for his iPad. "She won't remember a dress from 2019, and if she did, it's not like she'll judge you for wearing it again. Plus you just bought a new outfit for the trip. You'll be fine."

The new outfit was a purple sundress that did, in fact, bring May joy. It had that effortless just-threw-this-on boho chic look, which meant it cost as much as catering for two people on the wedding guest list they were trying to find ways to cull. She reminded herself this was only a weekend trip, and they'd probably spend most of it at the beach or sitting around the house, just the three of them. Swimsuit, shorts, T-shirts, all rolled neatly and set in place. Done.

As she finished zipping her bag, Josh stood and lifted it from the bed for her. He was old-fashioned that way.

He opened car doors, took out garbage, did the stereotypically male things. When they traveled together, he insisted on pulling both of their suitcases behind him through the airport. He was a caretaker.

As he tucked the bag out of the way in the bedroom corner, she crawled into bed, nestling Gomez into her side like a football. "I'm going to miss you so much, you little pumpkin head."

"And here I was, thinking you were talking to me," Josh said.

"I'll miss you too, but Gomez can't text and call me, can you, sweetie? No, you don't have any thumbs or we'd text all the time."

Even though the trip was only for a long weekend, this would be the longest she'd been away from her dog for years. It was also her first time out to the Hamptons since she'd worked at the law firm, where some of the other associates had parents with summer houses and would occasionally invite a coworker or two to share in their largesse.

Kelsey had rented the beach house for ten days, but May was heeding the warnings she had received about using her academic summers wisely. She needed to write if she was going to get her contract renewed and eventually get tenure. She knew herself. She worked best when she kept to a routine schedule. Plan your work and work your plan. Plus, Lauren and Kelsey were both single, while May was engaged and organizing a wedding. She

couldn't just take a whole week off and play with her friends in the Hamptons.

Her phone pinged from the nightstand. A text from Kelsey in the group thread. *Lauren, how'd it go today?*

He loved my initial ideas. He's paying me to watch the rough cut and come up with some initial samples. Fingers crossed!

Kelsey's ability to keep track of her friends' important plans was uncanny. It had been at least two weeks since Lauren mentioned that an award-winning documentarian had contacted her about the possibility of composing a film score. May would have never remembered that the initial Zoom meeting was scheduled for today.

Of course you crushed it, she chimed in. *Congrats!*

Climbing back into bed, Josh asked, "You're sure you want to do this trip?" He said it casually, as if they hadn't had this conversation multiple times since it was planned three weeks earlier.

"Of course. I told you. I'm excited. Do you not want me to go or something?"

"No, I promise it's not that," he said, pulling her close into a spoon position. His left hand held hers as he adjusted her engagement ring to center the Tiffany-cut diamond on her finger. "I will manage to live without you for three days. But can I just remind you that you told me on that trip to New Orleans that I was the only human being who you could share a roof with for more than two days?"

"Oh my god. That makes me sound like a total psychopath."

"Well, to me it was very romantic, because it meant that other people drive you crazy in a way that I do not. And now you've committed yourself to spending seventy-two hours with these women. Honestly, I'm not sure whether to be more worried about you or them."

She rolled over to face him. "Lauren and Kelsey are different. I've talked to them, like, every single day for more than a year." They didn't actually *talk*. But the group text thread among the three of them had somehow grown into an omnipresent conversation. "I've known them since I was twelve years old."

"No. You *used* to know them. Not the same." His lips curled into a sly smile. He knew he had a point. This would be the first time she had seen Lauren and Kelsey in person at the same time for nearly a decade.

"Well, I was super close to Kelsey for like ten years—all the way through college. And Lauren and I never fell out of touch."

"A few phone calls a year and lunch when she comes to New York is not the same as a vacation together under the same roof."

"No, but back in the day, the three of us basically lived together for weeks on end."

"When you and Kelsey were kids at summer camp a lifetime ago."

"One, Wildwood was an *arts* camp." And she hadn't

exactly been a kid that final summer after college graduation, when the economy crashed and even her Ivy League degree couldn't land her a good job. Off to law school she would go instead, spending the interim summer as a counselor at the camp where she'd once been a student. She was surprised when Kelsey chose to do the same. Kelsey had a ready-made job waiting at her father's commercial real estate company, but when she found out May's plan, she asked her father if she could defer adulting to join her.

"And two," she added, "don't make me sound like such a geezer." She ran the math in her head. "Wow, that last summer at Wildwood was fifteen years ago." Not half a lifetime, to be sure, but how was that even possible?

"May, you are definitely not a geezer." Josh gave her a soft kiss on the lips. "And even when you are . . ." He moved down to her clavicle, and she felt herself smiling. "Your gray hair and wrinkled skin will be all my old man junk needs to—"

She pushed him away playfully. "Oh god, I'll never get that image out of my head."

"My OMJ will have you saying OMG."

"Stop!"

He pulled her close to him again, nudging Gomez to the foot of the bed and wrapping his arms around her. "I am going to miss you," Josh whispered. "I don't even remember what it's like to sleep without you."

"You'll have Gomez."

"You're really sure you want to go? What if your pen pals are torture in real life?"

"They won't be." She didn't know how to explain to Josh how important this trip was. A year ago, after the worst day of May's life had made her infamous, Lauren—more than anyone, more than her mother, more than even Josh—had been there for her. And then, through Lauren, Kelsey was there too, in the group thread that sometimes felt like her only tether to sanity.

Of course she was going to East Hampton tomorrow. She couldn't wait.