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Stolen Child

Written by Laura Elliott

Published by Avon

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LAURA ELLIOT

Stolen Child

AVON

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Acknowledgements

All stories begin with an idea. Sometimes it arrives fully formed, sometimes it stirs on the breath of a memory. *Stolen Child* belongs to the latter category.

When I was a young girl, I read a newspaper report about a stolen child. She had been snatched when she was a baby and was about to be reunited with her family. Despite my own young years, I appreciated the trauma involved, and the adjustment she would have had to make when she met these strangers, who were her flesh and blood. That memory was the breath that stirred my story into life.

However, *Stolen Child* is fiction. The beautiful and mysterious Burren in County Clare exists, but Maoltrán is my own creation, as is the Valley View Maternity Clinic, St Anna's Clinic and the Chalwerth Industrial Estate. So also, are the cast of characters who journey through these pages.

I'd like to extend special thanks to those who helped me to bring it all together, in particular, Peter Brunton and Mary Coffey for their advice on police procedures and maternity care. Thanks also to Sarah Jane Davis for her valuable input.

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Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

From 'The Stolen Child'
by William Butler Yeats.

Chapter One

Susanne
Midsummer 1993

I buried my baby on the shortest night of the year. We were shielded by old walls as I laid her to rest in a shadowy wilderness of lilac and elderberry. She was my almost-child, my shattered dream. Sixteen weeks in my womb before she came away. Born on the longest day of the year, webbed fingers and toes, her veins delicate as skeins of silk. Sweet little monkey face.

The pain took me by surprise. When it came, I was standing by the gate leading into Dowling's Meadow, feeding sugar lumps to Augustus. I heard gunshots in the distance. Mitch Moran, clay pigeon shooting again, and, beyond the lane, the pulse of traffic as cars, driven too fast along the narrow road, signalled an end to another working day. Such a twilight, clouds streaking like lava across the sky, the rooks looping and clamouring above the trees. Then I felt it, the familiar cramping in my stomach, the low drag on my spine.

Sugar crunched like icicles under my feet when I stepped back from the gate. The pain was slight at first and eased quickly, as if teasing me into the belief that I was imagining it. I walked carefully back towards my house, hoping there was still time

to save her. But the evening was on fire, a conflagration setting the countryside alight, and the scattering rooks fell through the air like charred scraps of paper. Even the flowers in the hedgerows hurt my eyes, the scarlet pimpernel, the blood-red poppies swaying as I bent over them, cradling my stomach until the pain eased and I could walk again.

I knelt on the bathroom floor and gripped the edge of the bath. The cramps ebbed and surged, each one becoming more insistent, more cruel. Each one signalling the end of another dream. I thought of ringing David but, even before I uttered the words, he would hear my ragged breathing and know. He was too far away to bring me comfort and I could not bear his disappointment, not yet. I thought of ringing my gynaecologist, an austere man with a masterful knowledge of the female anatomy, but he has never been able to answer my most basic question. *Why?* He would shake his head and offer false comfort, assurances and condolences. I thought of ringing my mother-in-law. Miriam is practical and kind. She would come immediately and drive me to the hospital, not saying much, because it had all been said before. But I stayed where I was, knowing that what was about to happen would be swift and soon. No waiting around, no false hope, no time for anything other than the fluid separation between life and loss.

Once again, my body had betrayed me. Once again, it had defied my will and destroyed what David and I, with grim determination, had created.

Body and mind are one, Miriam always argues, the spirit and the flesh, compatible and whole. Wrong . . . *wrong*. The body triumphs every time and I am left holding the husk.

This little one had no fight. She slid cleanly away, so tiny, yet capable of so much brutal force as she left me. I remember wailing. I needed to keen this loss and I was glad to be alone,

not subjected to the constraints of a hospital where the feelings of others must be considered. When I could cry no longer, and such a time will always come, I went through the rituals of separation. Familiar rituals by now and usually carried out by efficient midwives, their expressions sympathetic, their eyes gazing beyond me to the other mothers, the ones with reasons to rejoice.

I wrapped my daughter in a soft white towel and rocked her in my arms. I rested my back against the wall. It grew dark outside. I felt hot then cold, my thoughts lucid then drifting. Why fight any longer? Someone would find us eventually.

I ignored the phone when it rang. The caller was insistent. The sound made me quiver but I stayed where I was. The silence, when it stopped, pressed against my ears. I became conscious of other sounds: the creak of old wood, the hiss and gurgle of pipes, the intrusive sighs of a house that has belonged to many generations. The bathroom blind clanged against the window frame and demanded my attention. I wanted to rise and close the window, keep out the scent of the night scented stock I had planted in the spring. It wafted in waves through the stifling atmosphere: sweet and cloying, demanding my attention.

The phone rang again. I became afraid. If it was Miriam, she would drive over to see why I was not answering. Earlier, I had left her working late in her studio. She was probably still there burning the midnight oil, as she usually did when she had an exhibition coming up. If it was David calling from the oil rig, he would ring his mother and the result would be the same. She would drive over immediately to check that all was well. The back door was open. She would enter unannounced and then it would be too late.

I stumbled to my feet and laid my baby, my still and silent

little bundle, on the floor. I opened the door of the living room. My hip knocked against the sideboard. Yellow roses drooped in a vase. Some petals had already fallen and more followed, spilling silently onto the polished wood, as if my laden breath had disturbed their fragile link to the stem. How long had I been drifting? Minutes, hours? Somewhere, in my mind, I was still bending over the blood-red poppies and the rooks were swirling.

My suspicions were correct. Miriam's anxiety was carefully controlled yet it stretched, taut as a membrane, between us. She asked how I was and I told her I was fine . . . fine. My voice was steady. That surprised me. Steady and calm while inside I was howling.

This was the second time she had called, she said, and she waited for an explanation.

I told her I'd been walking – such a fine, balmy evening. She warned me that the lane could be dangerous, easy to trip on a broken branch, to slip on mulching leaves; she knows every step of the lane, as David does, but I am a city woman, transplanted.

'I'll drop in and see you on the way home,' she said. 'I want to show you the new sketches.'

I almost blurted out the truth. But I thought about the last time, and the time before, and before . . . and the well-worn, well-meaning platitudes that stretched thinner and thinner each time she uttered them. Tomorrow, when I was stronger, more able to handle my grief, then I would break the news.

'I'm on my way to bed,' I said. 'I'll look at them tomorrow. Talk to you then.'

I walked to the front door and folded my arms, pressed them against my breast. Light spilled around me but, beyond the porch, an impenetrable darkness stretched across the

Burren. It seemed, as I stood there, that the night was whispering, that even the wind breathed my pain. In the rustle of leaves against the wall I heard the whispers and I heard them rise above a howl that lunged from the darkness. Phyllis Lyons's dog barking at the moon, the sound silenced as suddenly as it started. But still the whispering continued. I felt myself sinking into the powerful refrain, my lips moving, framing the words, making them audible – *No more . . . no more . . . no more . . .*

What does premeditated mean? Is it a conceived plan – or a thought unborn until the moment of delivery? I wrapped my baby in a white blanket and sealed her in a plastic shroud. I carried her gently to the old cottage in the lane. It hulked in the half-light, a crumbling ruin, shouldering briars and ivy, the ground covered in dense banks of nettles. Children once played within these crumbling walls and slept beneath a thatch that hugged them tight. Long gone now, both the children and the thatch. I stumbled through the weeds and the high purple thistles that pushed their heads through the cracks in the stone floor. I laid her down on white bindweed bells and dug her grave outside the walls.

The garden has long lost its form. A low drystone wall marks its boundaries. In the summer the whitethorn and lilac grows wild, and the ripe fruit drops silently from a long-forgotten plum tree during the autumn months. I wanted to name her. Everyone needs a name to stamp their identity on this world, no matter how brief their stay. Joy, I whispered. You would have brought us such joy. My body ached, bled, wept for what I had lost; but when I left that place, my mind was a cold, determined force with no room for grief or doubt.

In the hallway, I paused before a mirror. The weight I had gained during my brief pregnancy seemed to have fallen

from my cheeks. My eyes had steel in the blue, a stranger's eyes staring back at me through swollen eyelids, defying me to question or condemn. My hair looked dark, the blonde strands lank with sweat and mud. I was unrecognisable from the woman who had earlier walked the lane; yet, it seemed effortless, this casting aside of an old skin and stepping into the new.

I slept and awakened, slept again. I had no memory of dreams. Dawn was leaching the stars from the sky when I arose and showered dirt from my body, burned my clothes, the towels, the bathroom mat. I washed the floor and walls. I threw out the yellow roses. A bird sang outside the kitchen window, a shrill, repetitive solo, until others took up the song. Their chorus throbbed through the morning.

I rang Miriam and told her I would work from home for a few days. Too many interruptions in the office and I had spreadsheets to prepare, catch-up phone calls to make. Later, David rang from the rig.

'Our baby moved,' I told him. 'Like a butterfly, fluttering wings beneath my heart.'

The words turned to ash in my mouth but they had been spoken and I heard him sigh, as if he had placed his hands upon my belly and felt his child respond. And all around me, in the cracks and crevices of these walls, in the nooks and crannies of this old house, in the chinks of all that had passed since I moved here, the voices whispered – *No more . . . no more . . . no more.*

Chapter Two

Susanne
September 1993

Carla Kelly is everywhere. The public face of Anticipation. I see her on billboards and bus shelters, in glossy advertisements. Her white teeth, her full pink lips, her long blonde hair, and that look in her brown eyes, that amber shimmer of contentment; earth mother-to-be, with attitude and glamour.

These days, she's the first celebrity to be interviewed in the media whenever the subject of pregnancy is aired. She writes a column in *Weekend Flair*. 'My Pregnancy Diary' she calls it. How to retain one's sexuality and sense of fashion during those long nine months. Promoting Anticipation all the time. One thing about her, she always was professional.

The Anticipation maternity collection, Dee Ambrose told me when I called into the Stork Club boutique this afternoon, is the most popular label she's ever carried. Lorraine Gardner is an excellent designer and she's touched gold with Anticipation. I was so impressed, I bought a pair of fine wool trousers and a silk twist top.

Perfect for the final trimester, said Dee, and wrapped them in tissue paper before placing them in a carrier bag.

Anticipation was written in gold lettering against a black background. An elegant bag for an elegant collection. On the way out of the boutique, I almost collided with a life-size cutout of Carla Kelly. Dee laughed, noticing how my mouth opened with an apology in the same instant that I realised it was part of the promotion.

Only the big campaigns can afford her now. Her career took off after that lingerie promotion. It gave her an edge, a notoriety, all that sleek flesh and red lace flashing from the billboards. Drivers rang talk radio and complained that her image distracted them during rush-hour. Lorraine Gardner wouldn't have had a chance of running her Anticipation campaign if Carla Kelly hadn't been her sister-in-law.

I carried my carrier bag like a banner to the Nutmeg Café where I'd arranged to meet my mother-in-law. The rain fell steadily as I crossed Market Square and I walked carefully on the slippery cobblestones. A wretched day for the Saturday market, what with the wind billowing the awnings and people scurrying past the stalls towards the nearest shelter.

The Nutmeg was crowded. The smell of damp wool reminded me of crowded buses on muggy school mornings. Women stopped at my table to tell me I was blooming. Even the cashier, a frail, round-shouldered woman, smiled as if she'd known me all her life and said my bump had become enormous since the last time she saw me. I've no memory of us ever meeting but she knew that David had returned to the rig and that I'm planning an end-of-season discount sale at Miriam's Glasshouse. I grew up in the solitude of crowds but here, where the population is sparse, everyone seems to know my business. Miriam arrived at the Nutmeg shortly afterwards and apologised for being late. Something to do with bumping into acquaintances on every corner she turned. She hugged me. Took me quite by surprise. No time

to move before I was enveloped in her arms. My mother-in-law has a habit of nudging and hugging and tapping me when I least expect it. I've never grown used to her effusiveness. I expect it's to do with my upbringing – nothing touchy-feely about my parents. I've told her about my childhood. The silence and the separation, two people living on either side of a glass wall of indifference, so steeped in their own unhappiness they were incapable of reaching out to me.

'It explains a lot,' Miriam said, and pitied me for the tenderness I'd never experienced.

I'm willing to endure her pity but not her touch. 'Don't tempt fate,' I warn her when she asks if my baby is moving. Now she no longer seeks permission to rest her hands on my stomach, but today in the Nutmeg she hugged me so tight I thought my heart would flip over.

Phyllis Lyons entered and came straight to our table. No asking, just an assumption that, as Miriam's school friend and my nearest neighbour, she had every right to join us. She picked up my Anticipation carrier bag and placed it on the table.

'Go on, girl,' she said. 'Give us a look.'

I lifted out my new purchases and held them up for inspection. Miriam thought the twist top was a wonderful colour. 'Sapphire blue, a perfect match for your eyes,' she said, and ran her hand over the silky fabric. 'So glamorous,' she added, 'yet it looks so comfortable.'

Phyllis checked the price tag. 'Mother of God,' she said. 'Are you made of money or what? What's the sense of glamour when you look like a whale? If I were you, I'd just keep letting out the waistband.'

What does she know? She's a middle-aged spinster and gone beyond all that now.

Miriam looked apologetically at me and placed my clothes

back in the carrier bag. She finds Phyllis as irritating as I do, but neighbours, she warned me when I first came to live in Maoltrán, have long memories. It's wise to keep on their good side.

'I feel sorry for her,' she said, when Phyllis finally left to pick up a prescription for her mother. 'It's no joke looking after a creaking door and that mother of hers has been creaking for as long as I can remember.'

She asked when I was due to see Professor Langley again. 'Next week, I told her. I'll take the afternoon off, if that's okay with you?'

'Of course . . . absolutely.' She nodded vigorously. Her anxiety smothers me. The harder she tries not to show it, the more obvious it appears. She's nervous about the long distances I drive. But I'm her marketing manager. It's my responsibility to meet with customers. She keeps telling me to start my maternity leave and take it easy for the final months.

'But what on earth would I do,' I ask her, 'sitting all by myself in an empty house? I'm fit and healthy. I intend working until the last minute.'

'David warned me to keep a close eye on you and not let you overdo things,' she said. 'It worries me,' she added, 'him being on that oil rig. If anything . . .' She paused, uncomfortable at having to remind me that I've a bad track record when it comes to bringing her grandchildren into the world. I try not to give her cause for concern.

It has not been difficult to maintain the illusion of pregnancy. I've made a harness with bindings that fit snugly below my breasts and under my stomach. I pad it with firm fillings that outline my expanding curve. I'm so conscious of avoiding contact with anyone that my antennae remain on full alert, tremblingly cautious, always watchful. My face

looks too gaunt for a woman in her last trimester but people see what they want to see and their eyes are always drawn to my stomach.

Hopefully, Professor Langley has forgotten my existence. His secretary handled my decision to change gynaecologists with chilly politeness and sent me a bill for my last appointment and scans.

At the start of the month, David arrived home on leave, his skin tanned and taut from the harsh North Sea gales. I hid the harness then, and drank so much water every day that my stomach felt as tight and swollen as a drum. My food was fat and starch, it sickened me, but my weight kept increasing. He transformed the spare bedroom into a nursery. He painted the walls a pale apple green and hung one of Miriam's seahorse mobiles above the carry-cot. We travelled to Dublin and stayed for a weekend with my father and Tessa. We bought a pram and the carry-cot, a feeding chair, a changing station. The whispering grew more intense as we made our decisions. Each time I faltered they whispered . . . *Remember us . . . remember us . . . no turning back . . .* Whenever I felt the urge to run free from the shadow of that cottage and bring the dream to an end, they'd whisper *stay . . . stay. Be silent*, they urged, when the truth pressed against my teeth so hard it ached to be heard. *Be brave*, they whispered, when David laid his ear too late to my stomach and said, 'I can't feel anything . . . Well, maybe I do . . . it's *so* hard to tell.'

What he'd felt was my shudder of fear, my womb contracting with dread determination.

That is how our baby grows, carried into being on a whisper.

I met a horse whisperer once. He was small and stout and wore a wide-brimmed hat with a jaunty feather in the side.

To be called a horse whisperer sounded mysterious and powerful, but he said he was simply a man who understood horses. He came to us soon after we purchased Augustus – the horse had too many bad habits for us to handle alone. I'd watched him stand before Augustus, face to face and then cheek to cheek, not threatening, just empathising, reaching deep into the horse's psyche and connecting with the rage that lay at the heart of his flailing behaviour. By the time he'd finished, Augustus was still a spirited horse but he was biddable. He's gone from the meadow now, sold to a horse dealer. I told David he broke loose and almost knocked me to the ground. Seeing him at the gate every time I passed was too much to bear. I want amnesia.

It will happen, my whisperers promise. *Trust us . . . believe in us . . . we are the whispers of what should have been.*

David was reluctant at first to move from my bed, but when I told him I'd suffered some spotting, he understood. Nothing must endanger this new life we've created. I reassured him of my love, explained how hormones go berserk during pregnancy and lovemaking is impossible. 'Afterwards,' I promised him, 'afterwards when our baby is born, everything will be different.'

When I came home from the studio on the night before he left, he asked me to sit down and talk to him. He placed his hands on my arms and sank me into a chair.

'Be still,' he'd said, 'and listen to me. All this rushing around and working such late hours. Apart from our trip to Dublin, I've hardly seen you since I came home.'

He kissed me, his mouth seeking some response. My body clenched in protest, and I accused him of being demanding, selfish, thinking only of his own needs. How was it possible that he could not hear the terrified whine behind my bluster?

'Why,' he'd asked, 'do you spurn me? Do you think I'm a beast, incapable of lying by your side without wanting to invade your body?'

I almost told him. I could feel my knees weakening, the urge to kneel before him and confess. But the whisperers moved from gentle persuasion to implacable authority and straightened my spine. I faced him down, this man whose children I carried so briefly, all five of them, and who now urge me onwards . . . *No more . . . no more . . . no more.*

He drew away from me and wished me goodnight, chastely kissing my forehead. I understand his desire to be part of my experience but this is a journey I must take alone.

The rain had stopped by the time we left the Nutmeg and shoppers were drifting back to the market stalls. A traveller sat on a blanket outside the café. She was young, twenty at most, a baby in her arms, and a dull-eyed small boy hunkered beside her. I searched in my purse for coins but Miriam went back inside to buy coffee and sandwiches for the mother, milk for the boy.

'It's a boy child, missus,' the traveller said. 'A big boy child for his fine strappin' mother.'

Her hard, experienced eyes seemed to sear through my secret. The pavement swayed, or perhaps I stumbled, and the coins fell from my hand, rolling across the uneven surface until they were clenched in the boy's fist.

Phyllis Lyons arrived back from the pharmacy with her mother's medication and asked if she could get a lift home with me. Her car was being serviced and she'd missed the twice-hourly bus that runs past her house. Miriam waved and left us together, glad, I suspect, to escape to her house on the other side of Market Square.

Throughout the journey home, Phyllis talked non-stop

about her mother's ailments and her efforts to alleviate them. I stopped outside her gate and waited for her to leave the car.

'Come in and say hello to Mammy,' she said. 'She loves the bit of company.'

I stared at the grey lace curtains on the front window. Her mother would have been watching us, stooped on her Zimmer frame. Inside, the air would be stale and smoky.

'I'm expecting a call from David,' I said, and Phyllis nodded, as if my excuse echoed all the others she'd ever heard.

She stepped from the car and walked around the side of her house, squeezing her stocky figure past the tractor. Farming her few acres and looking after her mother . . . it can't be an easy life but she accepts it without complaint.

I turned down the lane and drove into the grey arms of Rockrose. I locked the front door behind me. Such relief, being alone again, able to breathe, to open my waistband, to allow the silence to settle until only the whisperers were audible.

I speak to women all the time. They look at my bump and confide in me. One woman told me she'd never once, during the nine months of her pregnancy, felt her baby move. He's eighteen years old now, on a track and field scholarship in the United States. Another woman was told by her gynaecologist that he could not detect her baby's heartbeat. That night she felt the first fluttering of life in her womb. Put a group of women together and they'll tell stories that mystify the medical profession.

Carla Kelly writes about them in her pregnancy diary. The happy, clappy stories about babies who kick and jog and elbow their way towards birth. I sent her a letter shortly after

that night. I asked her how it was possible to keep hoping when the womb rejects the dream. An anonymous letter, of course. She could not deal with my story. She passed my letter on to Alyssa Faye for her advice column. As a psychologist, Alyssa Faye believes she has a deeper understanding of the human psyche than the average journalist. Human suffering is grist to her mill. For three weeks she analysed my miscarriages, analysed my head, analysed my emotions. I did not write my story to pad her column. I wanted to see if Carla Kelly could understand, empathise. I got my answer.

Last week in Dublin, I saw her in Brown Thomas with her husband. At least I assume that's who it was. He stays out of her limelight but she held his arm in a way that suggested he was her rock. They were looking at baby clothes. I followed them from the department store and up to the top of Grafton Street. The flower sellers were busy. Birds of paradise flamed against white chrysanthemums and tightly coiled rosebuds jutted like spears from overflowing buckets. She bought the roses and continued onwards. I lost sight of them when they entered the Stephen's Green Shopping Centre. I probably could have found her. She's tall and distinctive enough to stand out from the crowd but I was too weak to move any further. I sat down in a coffee bar and asked for a glass of water. The waitress had the experienced eyes of an older woman counting months. She brought the water sharply and asked if I'd like her to call a taxi.

'You think it'll never end,' she said. 'Especially the last months. But it does and then you'll know all about it.'

She spoke with relish, they all do, warning of impending chaos and tiny impetuous demands that will turn my life upside down.

The taxi came shortly afterwards. I caught a last glimpse of Carla Kelly and her husband as I was leaving. They were

laughing at something one had said to the other. Her head was thrown back, her hand covering her mouth, as if her laughter was a wild thing she must contain. It's a long time since I laughed that way. Had I ever? I must have, especially in the early days with David. Now I laugh on cue. It sounds natural, spontaneous, even contagious. In public relations, where it's necessary to flatter and admire, I have acquired certain skills. I lean on them now but, from time to time, they slip. Then all I have to do is touch my stomach. Small gestures create an easily translatable language that gives me leave to be tired, anxious, irritable, uncomfortable and, occasionally, irrational.

Was it irrational to follow Carla Kelly that day? Of course it was. I realise that now but she is the face of Anticipation, taunting, flaunting; telling us it's easy, so easy and natural to carry a baby in the womb for nine dangerous months.

I too used to keep a diary. I made the last entry when I was sixteen years old. Hard to believe that's twenty-three years ago. I was pregnant then, eight months gone, on the final stretch, so to speak. And on the verge of becoming a teenage statistic. I lost my boy in March, gone before he had time to draw breath. Lots of blank pages afterwards. The world had become a greyer place, not worth recording. Nothing left for me except my scans and a whisper of what might have been.

'You've had a lucky escape,' my father said when I was discharged from hospital. 'Best thing you can do is get on with your life and forget it ever happened.' He'd taken care of everything and discouraged me from visiting the Angels' plot in Glasnevin Cemetery. It's such a poignant place to visit – that treasured, communal space where the tiny ones rest together.

'It's a new beginning for all of us,' he said. 'No looking back.' My mother was dead by then and he was about to be married again. He'd changed from the grim, dead-eyed man I used to know. His face was plumper and he laughed easily, joyously. I would look at Tessa and wonder how such a small, insignificant woman with rimless glasses and a slight stammer when she was nervous had wrought such a change in him.

I didn't blame him for not wanting to begin his married life with a troubled teenager and her baby. I just wished he hadn't looked so relieved, so determined to obliterate my experience. But it never was obliterated, just lightly buried . . . like my boy. I held on to my diary, kept it safe each time I moved, but I never had any inclination to read it until after that night in the cottage. Funny experience . . . rediscovering the young me. I was on a wild carousal all right, and heading in only one direction.

Now I'm filling those blank pages. Dates don't matter. Time is suspended. Writing about it helps. Otherwise my mind is frantic, thoughts running like ants beneath an upturned stone. How did I work through that wall of pain? There has to be a reason . . . has to be. Three months have passed since then yet the memory clings to my senses. I hear the clunk and clank of a spade, smell the dank, uncovered earth. I see a small bundle resting in that narrow cleft. I feel the clay beneath my nails, the briars tearing my legs, the polka-dot sting of nettles on my skin. And the taste that remains with me is bile, bitter gall.

It's time to close my diary and try to sleep. Close it now and silence the whisperers. Close these musty pages and trap the future as it waits in anticipation.