

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

If You Were Here

Written by Alafair Burke

Published by Faber and Faber

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

*if you
were here*

ALAFAIR
BURKE



faber and faber

First published in the USA in 2013 by
HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022

First published in 2013
by Faber and Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House
74-77 Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DA

Designed by Yvonne Chan
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY

All rights reserved
© Alafair Burke, 2013

The right of Alafair Burke to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in
accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

*This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent,
resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding
or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition
being imposed on the subsequent purchaser*

A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

978-0-571-30344-1



In Memory of Judge Betty Binns Fletcher

*if you
were here*

PART I

All around me are familiar faces.

—Tears for Fears

CHAPTER ONE

Nicky Cervantes smiled to himself as two Wall Street boys pressed past him, one reporting excitedly to the other that Apple stock was up six percent with the release of the company's new iPhone. He could tell from their tone that the good news for the market meant a hefty check for the duo.

Nicky was smiling because one might say he was sort of invested in the market himself these days. And those boys in suits and ties might be whistling over a six percent bump, but Nicky's own pay-back on the brand had nearly tripled in recent days. When demand for the latest gadget was this red-hot, no one seemed to care where the hardware came from. No additional work for Nicky, either. If anything, he felt a little less guilty about it. Anyone dumb enough to buy jack the day it came out deserved to lose it, was how he figured.

In truth, he never had felt much guilt over it. The first time, he expected to feel real bad, like maybe the lady would start crying or there would be pictures on there of her baby that she'd never get back. But when he finally worked up the courage to do it—to just grab that shit out of her hand while she was preparing some text message to send aboveground—the girl didn't seem to care. He still remembered her reaction. One hand protecting the thousand-dollar bag, the other covering the cleavage peering from the deep V in her

wrap dress. In her eyes, he was dirt, and the phone was a small price to pay to protect the things that *really* mattered.

He knew he wasn't dirt. But he also knew he wasn't VIP, like those Wall Street dudes. Not yet, anyway.

He was just a kid whose mom needed the six hundred dollars a month he'd been able to kick in to the household since he'd been working at Mr. Robinson's paint store on Flatbush the past year. And he was the star pitcher for the Medgar Evers High School baseball team with a .6 ERA, an 88 MPH fastball, a .450 batting average, and a sweeping curve and change-up that consistently racked up strikes. With numbers like that, the nine bucks an hour he was getting from Mr. Robinson had to go once the coach told him he was spread too thin. If all went according to plan, Nicky might even be drafted right out of high school. He could donate a thousand phones to charity out of his first paycheck to make up for what he was doing now.

Nicky was already fifty reach-and-grabs in, but he was still careful, compared to some of the dudes he'd met who also sold hardware. Tonight he was waiting on the N/R ramp at Times Square, six-thirty P.M. Packed trains. High ratio of Manhattanites to outer-borough types. Low odds of resistance.

It really was like taking candy from a baby. But the candy was a five-hundred-dollar phone, and the baby was some hot chick whose sugar daddy would buy her a new one. The standard play was to linger on the platform, like he was waiting to get on the train. Look for someone—inattentive, weak, female—standing near the door, fiddling with a gadget.

Reach. Grab. Run. By the time the girl realized her phone was gone, Nicky was halfway up the stairs. Easy.

He heard the rattle of the approaching train. Watched the lights heading his way. Joined the other cattle gathering close at the edge of the platform in eager anticipation of scoring a New York commuter's lottery ticket—an empty seat.

Six trains had come and gone without a baby and her candy.

This time, as the train lurched to a halt, Nicky saw what he'd

been looking for through the glass of the car doors. Eyes down, phone out.

Reddish blond hair pulled into a ponytail at the nape of her neck. Long-sleeved white sweater, backpack straps looped over both shoulders. Despite the train's lurch, she typed with two hands, stabilizing herself against the bounce with her core strength.

Maybe that should have been a sign.

He stepped one foot into the car, grabbed the phone, and pivoted a one-eighty, like he had fifty times before. He pushed through the clump of angry riders who had followed him into the car and now stood before him, all hoping to secure a few square feet on the crowded train before the doors closed.

Had he known what would happen next, maybe he would have run faster for the staircase.

It wasn't until he hit the top of the landing that he realized he had a problem. Somehow he heard it. Not the sound of the shoes but the sound of surprised bystanders reacting.

Hey!

What the . . .

You lost your shoe, lady!

Oh my God, David. We have to leave the city.

Nicky sneaked a glance behind him to see the woman kicking off her remaining ballet flat as she took two steps at a time in pursuit. She had looked sort of average middle-aged through the subway doors, but now she had a crazy look of determination on her face. In her eyes. In the energy of her forearms as they whipped back and forth at her sides.

At the top of the stairs, he spun left and then right, up the ramp toward the electronics store positioned between the N/R tracks and the 1/2. Why were some trains labeled with letters and others with numbers? Strange how random thoughts popped into his head when he was stressed.

He could hear the thump of an old Run-DMC song that his father listened to when he was still around. Nicky was in luck. The break dancers always attracted a dense semicircle of onlookers.

He leaped over a stroller on the near side of the audience, evoking an “oooooh” from viewers who thought his vault across the make-shift stage was part of the act. Picked up the pace once again, gaze fixed on the stairs that would take him to the 1/2 platform.

He heard more shouts behind him. The crowd hadn’t stopped her. A kid cried as he fell to the ground.

Girl wasn’t messing around.

He sprinted down the stairs, hoping to hear the familiar clack of an incoming train. No luck.

He thought about abandoning the phone, but the platform was too packed. The phone would fall to the ground, unnoticed by her, scooped up by someone whose good luck today rivaled his bad.

He decided to use the crowd to his advantage. He analyzed the platform that awaited him like an obstacle course, plotting out three or four weaves to maneuver his way to the next exit.

He risked another look behind. The woman had gained on him. She was just as fast, maybe faster. And she was smaller, more nimble. She was finding a more direct path than he’d navigated.

Up ahead, he spotted a busker warbling some “Kumbaya” song behind a cardboard sign he couldn’t read from his vantage point. The music was shit, but something about the message must have been magic, because a mass of people huddled around the open guitar case.

They were spread out across the platform. No gaps that he could see.

She was still gaining on him.

He heard the distant clack of a train. Saw lights coming on the left. A local train north.

One pivot around the crowd and he’d be fine. He’d keep running until the train stopped. Hop on board at the last second. Wave goodbye to all this once the doors closed behind him.

Almost over.

He dodged to the left, turning sideways to scoot around a pillar.

He saw a lady’s long black hair swing like a shampoo ad. He heard himself say “sorry” on impulse as he felt the heavy thud against his right hip. As he fell backward, he saw the object that had bumped

him—the brunette's hot-pink duffel bag—followed by the message on the busker's cardboard sign (THE PREZ AIN'T THE ONLY ONE WHO NEEDS CHANGE), followed by a sea of shocked faces as his body hit the tracks.

It was funny what he thought of in the few seconds that passed as he lay there. His right arm. Would his right arm be okay? As the sound of the train grew louder, he wondered whether his mother would find out why he'd been in the Times Square transit station after school instead of behind a cash register at Mr. Robinson's paint store.

Reflexes kicked in. More than reflex: a deep desire to live. Without any conscious thought, he pressed himself flat between the tracks. More screaming.

He closed his eyes, hoping he wouldn't feel the impact.

And then he felt something he hadn't expected: his body being lifted from the ground. He opened his eyes but saw only white. Was this heaven?

The plane of white moved, making way for the scene of the subway platform again. People staring. Screaming. Asking if he was okay.

He looked toward the blurred, fading plane of white. It was her sweater, topped by the strawberry-blond ponytail, still tightly in place. The forearms were pumping again as she took the stairs two at a time, no pause in sight.

She held her recovered iPhone in her hand.

And Nicky?

Nicky was going to live.

CHAPTER TWO

Sitting in a borrowed Chevy Malibu outside Medgar Evers High School, McKenna Jordan thought that kids sure had changed in twenty years. Twenty-five, actually, she realized, since she was their age. How was that possible?

The last bell had sounded only three minutes earlier, and the street in front of the block-long brick building was filled with boys in low-slung pants and ball caps and girls in baby tees and skinny jeans. Some lit cigarettes before hitting the bottom step of the school entrance. Public displays of affection ran rampant—full-on make-out sessions, complete with roaming hands. Even with her car windows up, McKenna had overheard just about every obscenity with which she was familiar, plus a couple of new ones. (At least when one girl called another a “dick trap,” McKenna assumed that wasn’t a good thing.)

It wasn’t as if McKenna and her friends had been angels: smoking, drinking, cussing, even a few teen pregnancies at the school, as she recalled. But at 3:03 P.M.? Right outside the school building? In open view of parents, teachers, and administrators? No way. They’d been too afraid of the consequences.

Maybe the kids hadn’t changed after all. Maybe it was the adults who were different.

She checked her phone again for messages. Nothing. McKenna hated waiting for the cooperation of fickle sources. She owed the magazine an article for the next edition. One possibility involved the kid she was here to see at the high school. The other was about Judge Frederick Knight, a notoriously offensive judge who should have been thrown from the bench years before. Both stories needed significant work before she could go to print—work that required information from people whose conduct she couldn't control. That saying about letting go of the things you couldn't control? Not McKenna's motto.

She jerked at the sound of knuckles rapping against the glass of the passenger-side window. She clicked the doors unlocked, and Dana Frazier hopped into the seat next to her. The dark colorful ink that spiraled up her left arm was in stark contrast to the rest of her appearance. Standing barely five feet tall with a blond pixie haircut, Dana was one of those people who looked like she might fit in your pocket. She was so compact that her tiny torso was dwarfed by the enormous Canon hanging from her neck.

McKenna reached out and flicked the camera strap. "You had a two-thousand-dollar camera bouncing around you on the F train? Haven't you heard? Apparently people actually *steal* things on the New York City subway."

Dana flexed her tattooed arm. "I've got mad self-defense skills."

McKenna handed her the car keys. "You mind waiting here after the pictures? I want to talk to the kid alone before we go."

"No problem."

When McKenna had called Dana to ask if she could snap some photos down in Fort Greene, the photographer had said she was taking shots of the Occupy Wall Street protestors, hanging out in the Financial District months after the national attention had passed. McKenna had offered a ride in one of the magazine's fleet cars, but Dana declined, most likely because she had been somewhere else entirely, probably working on the avant-garde photographs she took on the side.

Good for Dana, McKenna thought.

“Speaking of theft,” Dana said, holding up the iPad that McKenna had left on the car dash. “I’m putting this under the seat. These ruffians will grab anything that’s not bolted down.”

The high school didn’t have its own baseball field. McKenna and Dana found the team practicing on a square of concrete that served the triple function of baseball diamond, basketball court, and playground to the neighboring grade school.

A well-built man with a shaved head and a golf shirt stretched tight around his biceps watched his suited-up team jog laps around the bases. Once the two women hit his periphery, he rotated toward them, hands never leaving his hips.

McKenna handled the introductions. “Hi there. I’m McKenna Jordan, a writer for *NYC* magazine. This is Dana Frazier. We were hoping to get a word with one of your players, Nicky Cervantes.”

The coach sighed. “Been doing everything I can to make that boy famous for his right arm. Now he’s the klutz who tripped onto the subway tracks and had to be saved by a *woman*.”

McKenna threw Dana a warning glance. They were here to make friends, not change gender attitudes.

“Mind if we pull him away for a few minutes?” McKenna asked. “We’ll be quick. Who knows, maybe all the attention will help him in the draft come June.”

The coach bothered to look at McKenna instead of his team. He smiled beneath the bill of his blue Mets cap. “You know anything about Major League Baseball?”

“Not a damn thing. I texted my husband from the car to make sure I had the right lingo. Oh, and I know Jeter’s the one who looks like a Cabbage Patch doll.”

That earned her another smile.

“Cervantes!” the coach yelled, holding up a hand. “Five minutes, okay, ladies? Don’t want his arm getting cold.”

Nicky didn't seem surprised that a reporter and a photographer wanted his attention. "Already had three newspapers come by my mom's place last night. A magazine now?"

The night before last, a story started making the rounds on the Internet about a teenager saved from a subway splat by a woman's brave heroics. By yesterday morning, a more detailed version documenting the teen's promising baseball career and the mysteriousness of the unidentified woman had hit the front page of every local paper.

The upcoming edition of *NYC* magazine wouldn't be printed for two more days. McKenna needed to find a long-form angle on the fleeting tale du jour. So far journalists had described Nicky as an honor student and star athlete who'd lost his footing on the platform. McKenna already knew from talking to Nicky's mother that the honor-student label was pure spin. The only academic recognition Nicky had ever received was a certificate of perfect attendance the fall semester of his sophomore year. And when McKenna tried to interview Nicky's boss, a storeowner named Arthur Robinson, she learned that Nicky—unbeknownst to his mother—had quit the job three months ago.

There was another angle to the story. McKenna just had to find it.

She watched as a beaming Nicky struck a series of poses for Dana's camera. Hands on hips. Looking earnestly at the sky. Mimicking a windup.

She didn't really need the pictures, but the modeling session had him in the groove, feeling important. She gave a nod to Dana, who took her cue and headed back to the car, supposedly to grab another lens. Once they were alone, McKenna asked Nicky how he'd slipped.

"What do you mean? I just fell."

"But how? Was the platform slick? Did you have a seizure or something?"

The kid shrugged. "Not sure. Just went down."

“I’ve seen the MTA’s incident report. Bystanders said you were running frantically down the platform right before you fell. One said it was almost as if the woman was chasing you.”

If the subway Superwoman actually knew Nicky Cervantes, the story would take on new complexity. Why were they running? Had they been fighting? Why did she leave? And why wouldn’t Nicky admit he knew her?

“Whatchu trying to do here, lady?”

What *was* she trying to do? She knew this was the kind of story everyone would forget in a month, like most of the garbage she wrote. She’d like to say she was fostering civic involvement through journalism, but she was simply doing her job: blurring the lines between news, voyeurism, and entertainment. The most entertaining stories needed a protagonist. So far the media coverage of the “1 train tragedy averted” had focused on the good fortune of Nicky Cervantes. McKenna wanted to know about the woman who’d saved him only to sprint away.

The MTA’s security cameras had failed to capture any footage of the incident, but McKenna had the advantage of time. Her best lead was a comment posted online by someone claiming that his girlfriend had video of Nicky’s fall on her cell phone. McKenna had sent an e-mail to the commenter, hinting at the possibility of payment for the clip; she was still waiting for a response. In the meantime, her firsthand contact with Nicky was leading her to believe that her instincts were on track.

“I know you give your mom money, Nicky, even though you have no obvious source of income.” McKenna also knew that, despite New York City’s record-low crime rates, robberies on the subway system were on the rise. The story of a mysterious Superwoman saving a promising young teen was media gold. But the story of a female crime victim who simultaneously pursued—and saved—her robber? Pure platinum.

Nicky finally spoke. “You know what? Forget about the pictures, okay? I just want to live my life.”

“And I’m trying to find the woman who made it possible for you to do so, Nicky.”

“More power to you, then. If you find her, tell her I said thanks. And tell her I’ve changed. Don’t forget, okay?”

“Why’d you need to change, Nicky? Was there a reason the two of you were running through the station?”

He gave his right shoulder a quick massage. “Gotta get back to it now.” He returned to practice without another glance in her direction.

CHAPTER THREE

McKenna checked her cell as she walked to the car. No calls but two new e-mail messages, both from the same unfamiliar address, both with the same subject line: Big Pig. She skimmed them quickly.

One of her contacts at the courthouse had come through. Big Pig was one of many nicknames Judge Frederick Knight had earned among the local bar, this one referring to both his massive girth and his blatant sexism. The messages were forwards of e-mails Judge Knight had sent from his judicial address. They must have come from someone with access to the network. If they were authentic, they were tangible proof to confirm rumors that had been whispered for years. She would have enough material to expose Judge Frederick Knight as the lazy SOB he was.

When she took the driver's seat, she could feel Dana staring at her. "What?"

Dana continued to look at her expectantly.

"I've worked with you for two years, Dana. If I've got something funky on my nose, you're supposed to tell me." She rubbed her face with her index finger.

"You're snot-free. I'm just wondering if you want to talk about anything."

“Such as?”

“The article?”

“We work for a magazine, Dana. There are a lot of articles out there.”

“Your article. *The* article.”

“No. I most definitely do *not* want to talk about the article. No one should talk about the article. I’m starting to think I made a huge mistake writing the stupid thing.”

“Tammy told me you got a call from a literary agent. And from HarperCollins.” Tammy the editorial assistant always knew something about everything. Those calls had been to McKenna’s direct line.

“Stop listening to Tammy. She’s a noodnik.”

“Can a woman be a noodnik?” Dana asked.

McKenna had no clue. She grew up in Seattle. Went to college and law school in the Bay Area. A dozen years since her move to New York, her Yiddish still couldn’t be trusted. “Whatever. Tammy’s not exactly an accurate narrator.”

“Well, the narrator says you have a book proposal that goes to auction next week. The magazine piece was to start the buzz rolling.”

As usual, Tammy knew just enough to get the story wrong. The publishing house had asked about a proposal, and the agent had talked about the possibility of an auction, but a proposal going to auction next week? Not even close. Not to mention, the agent had made it clear that the book would need to be more than an extended version of the magazine article. It would have to be personal. “Intimate.” “Maybe even in the first person.” “Like a novel but true.” “You were barely thirty years old—dating and drinking at night, facing down cops and DAs by day. *That’s* the book!” The dreaded “memoir” word had been raised.

At first, when McKenna thought she’d be reporting real news, she saw journalism as an extension of her original work as a prosecutor. Attorneys and reporters both investigated facts and wove them into a compelling—and often spun—story. Ten years ago,

when McKenna was an assistant district attorney, she made the mistake of becoming a character in one of those stories she was supposed to narrate. Two weeks ago, she had repeated that mistake as a journalist by writing a ten-page feature article about the same case. But a *memoir*? What was that saying about the definition of insanity: making the same decisions over and over, yet expecting a different result?

McKenna's phone rang from her jacket pocket. She didn't recognize the number on the screen but answered anyway, eager for the distraction from Dana's interrogation.

The voice on the other end of the line sounded like a young woman. She said her name was Mallory. She talked the way all young women seemed to these days, slowing the pace of her speech and dipping her voice low into a "fry" at the end of her sentences.

"Hiiii. My boyfriend said to call. I was on the subway the other day when that lady pulled that kid off the traaaacks."

"Has anyone else contacted you about it?" It seemed like every witness expected to be paid for an interview or at least to get on television.

"No. After you e-mailed my boyfriend because of that comment you saw online, I told him to delete it. It happened so fast, the video doesn't even really show anything."

"Well, I'd love to see it." McKenna tried not to let her tone reveal her excitement. It was a stupid story, but at least it was a story. First Judge Knight's e-mails, now a video of the subway incident that had the entire city talking. She might have enough material to meet her next *two* deadlines.

"Yeah, okay."

"Can you e-mail it to me?" McKenna rattled off her address, but next to her in the passenger seat, Dana was shaking her head.

"Our e-mail system's for shit," she said. "Won't accept a big video file. Have her send it to my Skybox."

The details that came tumbling from Dana's mouth were Greek to McKenna. Her attempts to repeat them to young Mallory were reminiscent of the slumber-party game *Operator*, where words lost

all meaning when passed down a line of communicators. Frustrated, Dana finally extended a hand for the phone so she could speak to Mallory directly. Whatever had seemed so complicated to McKenna was cake to the two of them; Dana soon returned the phone with a satisfied smile.

“Thanks for that, Mallory. Do you mind if I ask, have you shown this to anyone else? Put it on YouTube or Facebook or anything?” Nowadays, anyone with a phone was an amateur reporter. The video wouldn’t be of any value to McKenna once it hit a public website.

“That’s so last year. Social networking is social *not*-working. I’m more into, like, privacy, so just leave my name out of it, okay? It was cool and everything, but I can’t believe people are making such a big deal out of it. I mean, you’re a reporter. Last time I checked, our country was still at war, you know?”

It wasn’t the first time McKenna had wondered about the merits of her career choices.

Once McKenna was off the phone, Dana retrieved the iPad she had stored beneath the seat for safekeeping. “Don’t want to forget this when you return the car,” she said. “You got 3G on this thing? I can hook you up on my Skybox action.”

McKenna nodded for Dana to work her magic, marveling at the woman’s ability to use the virtual keyboard for real typing. “I told Mallory to send the video to my public directory,” Dana explained. McKenna caught a quick peek at two heavily pierced twins holding fire hoses. She really didn’t understand Dana’s artistic impulses. “And I’m hitting bookmark so you can find it online without having to download to your device.”

Within seconds, Dana had tilted the screen toward her so they could watch together. The video was typical cell-phone footage: shaky, staccato, grainy. A close-up of someone’s back. The cement platform. McKenna turned up the volume. Voices, mostly inaudible. Screams. Someone yelling, “Oh my God!” Someone else yelling something about the train.

By the time Mallory had managed to point the lens toward the tracks below her, a woman in a white sweater, backpack secured tightly on her shoulders, was lifting a stunned Nicky Cervantes to his feet. As she grabbed him around the waist and hefted him halfway up the height of the platform, Nicky's body blocked the camera's view of the woman's face. A man in a denim jacket took Nicky by the wrists and rolled him onto the concrete.

The cell phone jerked toward the woman just as she finished hoisting herself onto the platform unassisted. She turned and sprinted barefoot toward the stairs, ponytail bouncing at the nape of her neck, just above her backpack. The footage returned quickly to Nicky before going black.

Dana let out a whistle. "That chick's kickass. Nicky probably weighs one-seventy. Did you see how she dead-lifted him?"

McKenna wasn't interested in the woman's strength. She rewound the video and tried to stop on the brief glimpse of the woman's face before she turned to run away. After three attempts, McKenna managed to hit pause at just the right moment.

She couldn't believe what she was seeing.

She hit replay and watched the entire clip again.

"So much for identifying Superwoman," Dana said. The image was grainy at best. "Don't worry. You'll find another way to hook in the masses. You always do."

But Dana had misinterpreted McKenna's expression. She wasn't disappointed. She was in shock.

She never thought she would see that face again. Susan Hauptmann had disappeared without a trace ten years ago.