



THE

# LIGHT PIRATE

*Author of*  
*Good Morning,*  
*Midnight*

*A Novel*

LILY BROOKS-DALTON



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**GRAND CENTRAL  
PUBLISHING**

NEW YORK BOSTON

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Grand Central Publishing  
Hachette Book Group  
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104  
[grandcentralpublishing.com](http://grandcentralpublishing.com)  
[twitter.com/grandcentralpub](https://twitter.com/grandcentralpub)

First edition: December 2022

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Brooks-Dalton, Lily, 1987- author.

Title: The light pirate / Lily Brooks-Dalton.

Description: First edition. | New York : Grand Central Publishing, 2022.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022004498 | ISBN 9781538708279 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781538708293 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3602.R64557 L54 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022004498>

ISBNs: 9781538708279 (hardcover), 9781538708293 (ebook)

E3-20221129-DA-NF-ORI

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# Power

*Somewhere west of Africa, so far from land the sky is empty in all directions, a storm begins. The water is warm, the waves are high. The air is heavy with moisture. A breath of wind catches, then circles back, churning itself into something new: a closed circuit gathering power, tighter and tighter. In this way, the storm grows. It matures. Learns to hold a shape. The warm water feeds it, fattens it, then urges it westward. Electronic eyes watch as it skims across the Atlantic. Soon enough, it earns a name. Reports are written about its speed and size. Preparations are made. There are other storms in this ocean, other pockets of hot, moist wind and rain-heavy cloud. But this one—this one will outgrow them all.*

## Chapter 1

FRIDA WATCHES KIRBY from the kitchen window while she washes Yukon Golds beneath a thin trickle of water. Scrubbing at the dim yellow skins, she decides not to peel them. Maybe the boys won't notice if she mashes them thoroughly enough—and if they do, she will cite nutritional value. Outside, beneath a bloated purple sky knifed with the sharp fronds of a coconut palm, Kirby stacks sandbags against the door to the tool shed. Even with the AC blasting, Frida can smell the rich stink of thunder in the air, something like ozone and gasoline and dirt all mixed together. The hurricane is close now. She can taste it.

The baby kicks so hard she holds on to the counter until it stops. It feels as if this tiny, unborn thing could topple her. She asked—no, begged—Kirby to take them north, beyond the cone of uncertainty, but this is the third hurricane of the season and the third time she's wanted to evacuate. The first one fizzled into a tropical storm before it even reached land. Heavy rain and a stiff wind and that was all. The second crawled up the opposite coast, wreaking havoc in Sarasota and Tampa, then swung back out into the Gulf. Before each one, he listened quietly to her pleas, calming her fears without succumbing to them, but then this morning something in her husband shifted. "Get yourself together," he snapped. "We're not leaving." She was stung, shocked by the hardness in his voice. A new

sound. Or new to her. It was just over a year ago that they met. Only six months since they married. There's so much to learn about one another.

Even if he were not bound to these storms by his work as a lineman, he would still be bound by something else. She has always understood this about him. He would still insist that this house is the safest place for them. This house—fortified by his labor, shielded from ocean winds by the wild tangle of live oak and cypress that looms just beyond the yard, but mostly guarded by the strength of his will. And isn't this at least partly why she fell in love with him? This faith in the strength of his own preparations. This promise of protection. A stolid, immovable weight—the anchor secreted inside his rib cage, holding him to the earth, to Frida, to Florida. If he believes they are safe, then maybe she can, too.

Resting a hand on her huge belly, she drops the last potato into the colander and twists off the faucet. The panic that has been with her all morning sharpens. It wasn't always like this. She used to be brave. Didn't she? The woman she was feels impossibly far away now, like a dream she can't quite remember. A thump outside startles her, but it's only Kirby laying down another sandbag. This is who she is now. The anxiety has become part of her. There's something about the way the baby has been stirring today that is almost urgent enough to make her get in the truck and go north by herself. There are his keys on the table. She could just leave everything where it is: chicken already in the oven, greens on the cutting board, potatoes in the colander. Would she take her stepsons? They wouldn't come even if she wanted them to.

All morning, the roiling clouds have been wrapping tighter and tighter around the sky and now all the blue has been squeezed out of it. Out the window, she watches Kirby admire his pile of sandbags in front of the tool shed and move on to the house, so sure his preparations are impenetrable. So sure of victory against his old adversary. The big coconut palm hanging over the yard sways. Its roots are sunk deep beneath the wilderness lurking at the edge of the property, but its trunk swings out over the lawn as if the

wild is reaching for the house with those big fingerlike fronds. As if it's trying to caress the family that lives here, or to crush them all. Or both. Frida knows all about beauty and violence arriving together. She's seen it up close; she knows what nature can do.

Kirby lifts a conciliatory hand when he sees her there in the window, and Frida, still holding her belly, trying to shrug away this sense of dread, turns away without acknowledging him—not because she is angry but because she is frightened. When they fought earlier, he took her frantic appeals to evacuate as an insult. “Why can't you just trust me?” he asked, bewildered. She didn't know how to tell him that this was the wrong question without knowing what the right one was. They still haven't made up.

Kirby's boys come tearing into the kitchen just then, all arms and legs and sounds too big for those little bodies. They are immune to the fear that curls up on Frida's shoulders, nestling softly against her neck, pressing up against her windpipe—a gentle, invisible stranglehold. They feel only excitement in the simmering electricity of the atmosphere, the barometric pressure plummeting as each hour passes. She can almost see the current running through them: Lucas skidding across the tile floor in his dirty white socks, Flip leaping after him, midair, falling, fallen, and upright again, all in the space of a breath.

“Boys,” she chides, doing her best impression of a mother. She has so little to guide her in these matters—when she was growing up, her own mother's defining characteristic was her lack of mother-ness. Everyone said so. It isn't that Frida regrets the way Joy raised her. How could she? Her childhood was singular, spent sailing between islands, with salt in every crevice and a vision of the sun permanently etched into the backs of her eyelids. She grew up everywhere and nowhere. The Keys, Puerto Rico, the Bahamas, Haiti, Panama, Venezuela. The only constants during Frida's formative years were her mother and their decrepit sailboat and the ocean itself. There was no school outside of Joy's instruction, and the friends she

did manage to make could last only until Joy announced a departure date. When they pulled anchor, Joy always said it was time to find a new pair of sea legs. *What's wrong with the old ones?* Frida would think. But she never complained. Of course she used to be brave. She had to be.

“Boys!” Frida says again, louder this time, but it still feels like a performance, something she’s only seen on television. They can tell, and so can she. If Joy were here, she would do all of this differently. She would be running through the house alongside them, playing their games, learning their secrets. She would be so unrelenting in her mission to win them over that finally these boys would have no choice but to love her. Except Joy isn’t here. This is the ache Frida is learning to live with.

She hears Flip and Lucas hurtling through the living room, the brisk creak of the screen door opening, and then a slap as it swings back against its frame. Out of sight, Kirby roars and the boys shriek, even Lucas, who recently decided that twelve was too old for games like this. All three of them round the edge of the house, back into view—the boys darting past the window, Kirby lumbering behind them with arms overhead, fingers wiggling. Frida instructs her nerves to settle and shoos away this circling, spinning unease. *See, she tells herself, it isn't real. No one else feels it. Everything is fine.* She holds this assurance. Examines it. Does she feel better? Maybe. But then the baby, turning again and again, thrusting its limbs up against the constraints of her womb, up into her intestines, dislodges the seed of calm. Everything is not fine. Frida props her stomach up against the edge of the counter, and the Formica presses against her, against them both. She lets the edge dig into her, trying to quiet this spark inside her, but there is no suppressing it. Maybe this feeling is just a symptom of the murky greenish-yellow glow outside, or the way the baby is churning inside her today, or these unbidden memories of her dead mother, or the fact that this season, more catastrophic storms have made landfall than any other...a record that will undoubtedly be broken next year, and then again the next. But most likely, she thinks, it is the



cumulation of these things packed together in the dense, hot air. It is the multitude, the crush of it all, the claustrophobic humidity of the atmosphere flooding her body, swarming along the surface of her skin. Surely that's it. It's overwhelm. Hypervigilance. Anxiety masquerading as intuition. But isn't there at least a chance it's the opposite? A pulsing intuition that she is trying her best to disown. A voice telling her that staying here will cost a great deal.

Kirby stops chasing his boys and returns to the wheelbarrow. He starts slapping the bags down in front of the kitchen door, the sound almost indecent, half-moons of sweat under his arms, a slick of moisture forming at his hairline, where just a few threads of silver are creeping into the brown. His every gesture claims competency, an all-encompassing aura of stewardship—over the sandbags and the doorstep they will shelter, over the ground he's standing on, over the boys that flit back and forth in the yard behind him, over this house, this day, this moment. Wherever he goes, he is rooted. It's what drew Frida to him when she saw him that first time, among the wreckage of San Juan. Even there, he exuded belonging.

She had planned only to visit Joy for ten days or so. It was the tail end of the summer before her last year of Rice's architecture program, meant to be a quick vacation to her floating childhood home. The boat was docked in their favorite marina off the coast of Puerto Rico—just for the season. With Joy, it was always just for the season. Even after Frida left at seventeen, Joy went on sailing between her favorite islands alone, never more than a handful of months in one place. She could have chosen the Caymans just as easily. Or maybe that bay off of Taboga, the one they anchored in after Joy showed Frida the Bridge of the Americas for the first time and Frida decided that one day she wanted to build such marvels. But Joy didn't choose either of those places. She picked San Juan.

Frida was excited to take a brief reprieve from the metallic crush of her life in Houston—two jobs, an unpaid internship, and soon a full course load, all clamoring for a finite amount of energy. She ached for the

unrelenting enthusiasm of her mother, the old comfort of falling asleep wrapped in waves, the way a shimmer of salt clung to everything. It was meant to be a balm after the endless hustle of Houston, where she could never seem to break even and always felt like an outsider. Then, just after she landed at Isla Verde, they named the hurricane—out there in the Atlantic, whirling all alone. Poppy, they called it. No one who had endured Hurricane Maria took its approach lightly. Everyone was as ready as they could be; it didn't matter.

What happened next is both vivid and incomplete. A therapist she saw a few times suggested that the missing pieces would return as the shock wore off, but Frida doesn't want them. She remembers plenty: wading through floodwater and debris, trying to convince overrun funeral parlors to cremate Joy's remains; the crowds in front of the airport, everyone waiting for the chance at a seat on a nonexistent flight to the mainland; sitting with a roomful of strangers in the FEMA shelter. And then there was Kirby, entering her field of vision like a beacon, like the first glimpse of land after so many days at sea. He was a man who knew what to do next when no one else did. She watched him and his crew survey the destruction and begin their work. Clearing debris, restringing electrical wires, planting new poles in the ground. Just one task at a time. The truth is, Kirby's happiest when he's fixing things. Sometimes she worries that this is the reason he married her.

Frida sets the potatoes on the stove to boil, the little diamond chips on her finger catching the witchy chartreuse light that is brewing beneath the bruised clouds—an unseen sunset illuminating the yard. Poppy was only a year ago, but time gulped Frida down whole. It feels as though she's lived decades since then, and now somehow, she is here, looking at a life she barely recognizes. She's loosely cognizant of the choices she made along the way: keeping the baby, saying yes when he offered this ring, breaking her lease and dropping out of grad school, moving to this little town on the east coast of Florida. But at the same time, she cannot shake the feeling

that she's been washed ashore on a strange beach. Did she really choose or did she just succumb? Is it a decision to hold on to a life raft, or is it something else? Tears form in the corners of her eyes. It's the hormones, she chides herself. All of this is just hormones. She loves Kirby, she loves her unmet daughter, and in this house they will build the kind of family she has always coveted. There is even space for these two little boys who don't belong to her. She doesn't need sea legs anymore; this ground is firm. It can hold her. It can hold all of them. She checks the oven, where the chicken fat is spitting in the bottom of the pan but the bird is not yet done.

The boys wash their hands the third time she tells them to, and even though she can see them barely obeying—no scrubbing, no soap even—she says nothing, considering the battle won. She lays a stack of plates and a handful of silverware down on the table, and Flip, the youngest, begins to set them out without being asked. She tries not to let her surprise show at this small gesture. He's always been her favorite of the two, and she likes to think that he is beginning to come around to her presence here. Out of the corner of her eye, she watches him line up the plates so that the pattern at each setting is straight, his little brow wrinkling in concentration, measuring the width between the edge of the table and the dishes with his fingers so they're all evenly placed—something she learned to do working in fine dining back in Houston. She has not taught him this, and Kirby certainly hasn't. It must have been their mother, an exacting woman she finds fearsome and fascinating and has met only once. The divorce wasn't clean. She can feel the fissures it left behind even when she doesn't always understand them.

Her first summer with these boys that aren't hers was unexpectedly hard. She had no idea what she was walking into until her lease in Houston had already been broken and the ring was on her finger and the baby was the size of a grapefruit. Kirby worked long hours, and when he was gone, the boys behaved badly. Lucas in particular, with Flip always a step or two

behind. No one was thrilled about how things went—not Frida; not Kirby; not their mother, Chloe; and certainly not the boys themselves—but summers and occasional weekends and every other holiday with Kirby were what the hard-won custody arrangement decreed. Frida’s preferences had no place on the calendar. So she did her best. She is still just doing her best.

Behind her, Lucas opens the fridge and begins to root through the crisper. She watches him dump a thin plastic bag of apples out into the drawer and then move on to the shelf above it, the bag floating softly down to the tile floor like a silver jellyfish.

“We’re about to eat dinner, buddy,” she says. “Nothing for you in there.”

“What is it, though? For dinner?” he asks, and she knows that this exchange is futile, that he has already decided not to like whatever she has made. A sense of defeat blooms inside her. The roast chicken is evident, steaming in its pan, stuffed with lemons and parsley, rubbed with butter. It looks good, mouthwatering even, but that doesn’t matter to him.

“Chicken and mashed potatoes and greens.”

“I don’t want that.”

“I thought it was your favorite.”

“Not the way you make it.” She tries so hard not to hate this kid, but he makes it difficult. Lucas lifts the lid on the potatoes and groans. “You didn’t even peel them? Isn’t there anything else?”

“The skins are nutritious.”

From under his breath, “Yeah, right.”

“Go tell your dad it’s almost ready, please.”

He opens the kitchen door and the sandbags come up to his waist. Scrambling over them, he goes in search of Kirby, who has moved on with his wheelbarrow. Frida drains the potatoes and begins to stamp the masher down into their soft yellow-white flesh. She is ferocious in this act of mashing, channeling all of her aggression and dread and determination