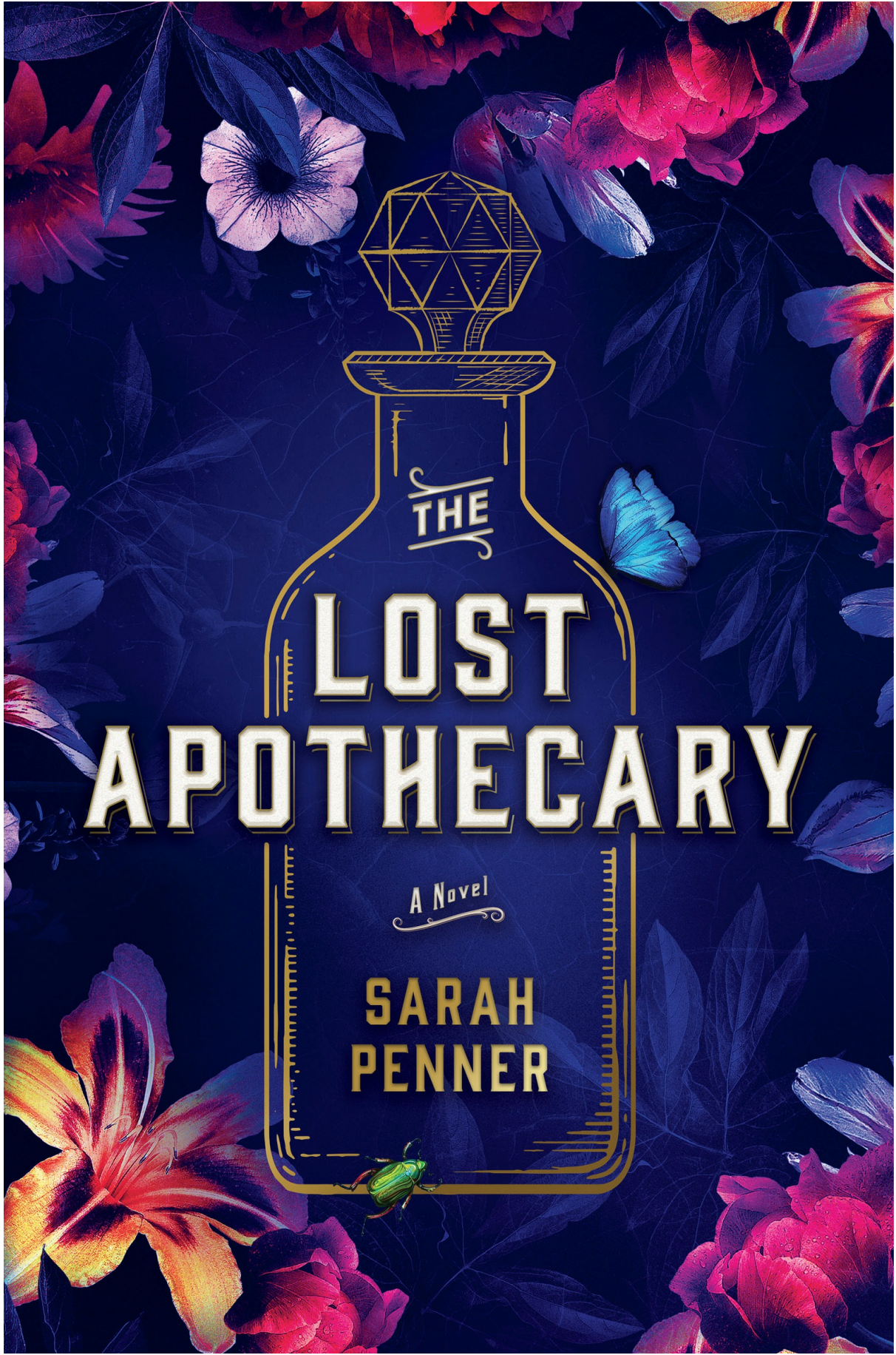




THE
LOST
APOTHECARY

A Novel

SARAH
PENNER



THE
**LOST
APOTHECARY**

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PENNER**

Advance Praise for The Lost Apothecary

“In *The Lost Apothecary*, Sarah Penner convincingly weaves three heroines and two timelines into one tale of poison, revenge, and the silent network of women helping other women in a world stacked against them.... A bold, edgy, accomplished debut!”

—Kate Quinn, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Alice Network* and *The Huntress*

“Dark, clever, and wickedly fun, *The Lost Apothecary* is a true page-turner. Sarah Penner has given us a puzzle box of women’s lives, betrayal, power, and history. It’s a book that slyly asks what any of us deserve and if, sometimes, that might not be a little poison.”

—Erika Swyler, bestselling author of *The Book of Speculation*

“Penner’s debut had me completely under its spell. The women of *The Lost Apothecary*, separated by centuries, seek both revenge and truth in this powerful story. Riveting and utterly original.”

—Fiona Davis, bestselling author of *The Dollhouse*

“Sarah Penner kept me guessing until the last page of this addictive, atmospheric novel... Meticulously researched, *The Lost Apothecary* is both a cure for idleness and a recipe for intrigue. Prepare to be consumed by this carefully plotted, propulsive debut.”

—Amy Meyerson, bestselling author of *The Bookshop of Yesterdays*

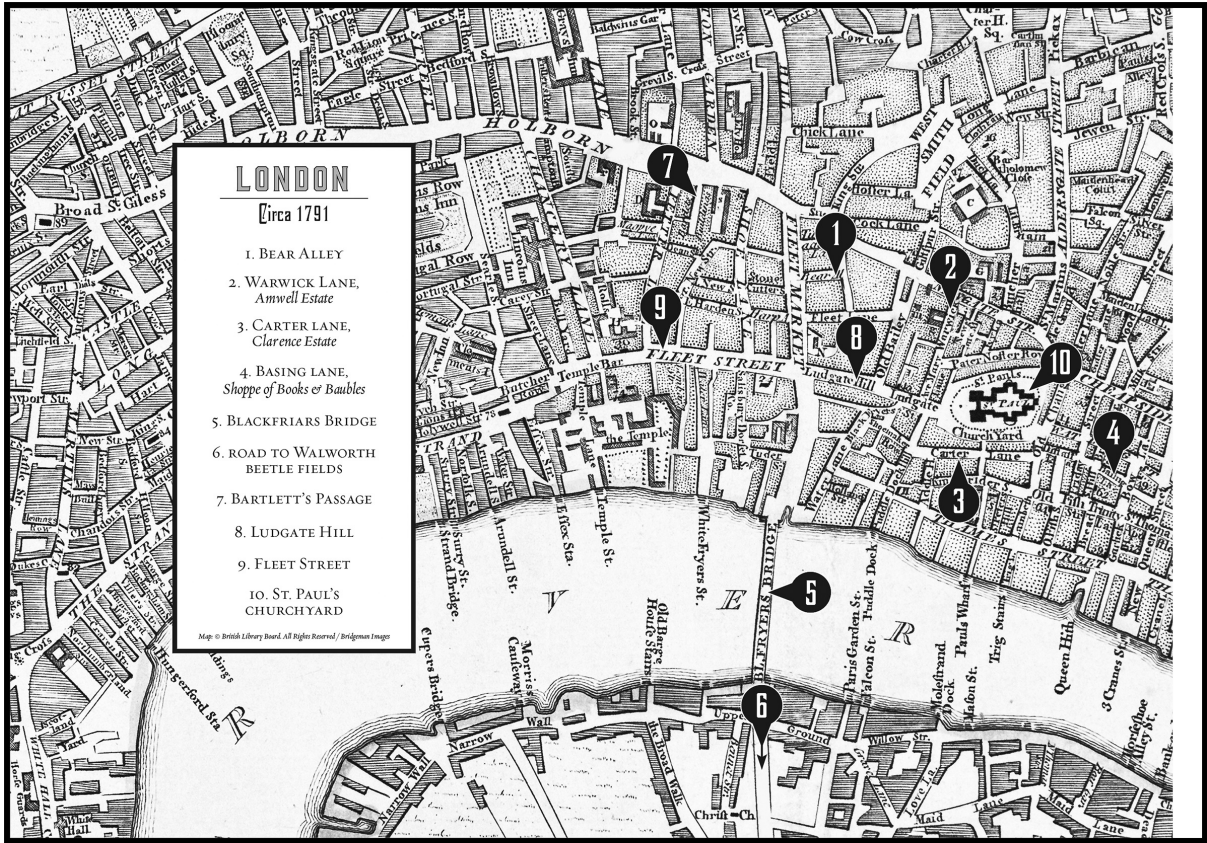
Sarah Penner is the debut author of *The Lost Apothecary*, to be translated into eleven languages worldwide. She and her husband live in St. Petersburg, Florida, with their miniature dachshund, Zoe. To learn more, visit sarahpenner.com.

The Lost Apothecary

Sarah Penner



For my parents



LONDON

Circa 1791

1. BEAR ALLEY
Amwell Estate
2. WARWICK LANE,
Clarence Estate
3. CARTER LANE,
Clarence Estate
4. BASING LANE,
Shope of Books & Bubles
5. BLACKFRIARS BRIDGE
6. ROAD TO WALWORTH
BEETLE FIELDS
7. BARTLETT'S PASSAGE
8. LUDGATE HILL
9. FLEET STREET
10. ST. PAUL'S
CHURCHYARD

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“I swear and promise before
God, Author and Creator of all things...

Never to teach ungrateful persons or fools
the secrets and mysteries of the trade...

Never to divulge the secrets confided to me...
Never to administer poisons...

To disavow and shun as a pestilence the scandalous
and pernicious practices of quacks,
empirics and alchemists...

And to keep no stale or bad drug in my shop.

May God continue to bless me
so long as I continue to obey these things!”

—Ancient Apothecary’s Oath

1

Nella

February 3, 1791

She would come at daybreak—the woman whose letter I held in my hands, the woman whose name I did not yet know.

I knew neither her age nor where she lived. I did not know her rank in society nor the dark things of which she dreamed when night fell. She could be a victim or a transgressor. A new wife or a vengeful widow. A nursemaid or a courtesan.

But despite all that I did not know, I understood this: the woman knew exactly who she wanted dead.

I lifted the blush-colored paper, illuminated by the dying flame of a single rush wick candle. I ran my fingers over the ink of her words, imagining what despair brought the woman to seek out someone like me. Not just an apothecary, but a murderer. A master of disguise.

Her request was simple and straightforward. *For my mistress's husband, with his breakfast. Daybreak, 4 Feb.* At once, I drew to mind a middle-aged housemaid, called to do the bidding of her mistress. And with an instinct perfected over the last two decades, I knew immediately the remedy most suited to this request: a chicken egg laced with *nux vomica*.

The preparation would take mere minutes; the poison was within reach. But for a reason yet unknown to me, something about the letter left me unsettled. It was not the subtle, woodsy odor of the parchment or the way the lower left corner curled forward slightly, as though once damp with tears. Instead, the disquiet brewed inside of *me*. An intuitive understanding that something must be avoided.

But what unwritten warning could reside on a single sheet of parchment, shrouded beneath pen strokes? None at all, I assured myself; this letter was no omen. My troubling thoughts were merely the result of my fatigue—the hour was late—and the persistent discomfort in my joints.

I drew my attention to my calfskin register on the table in front of me. My precious register was a record of life and death; an inventory of the many women who sought potions from here, the darkest of apothecary shops.

In the front pages of my register, the ink was soft, written with a lighter hand, void of grief and resistance. These faded, worn entries belonged to my mother. This apothecary shop for women's maladies, situated at 3 Back Alley, was hers long before it was mine.

On occasion I read her entries—*23 Mar 1767, Mrs. R. Ranford, Yarrow Milfoil 15 dr. 3x*—and the words evoked memories of her: the way her hair fell against the back of her neck as she ground the yarrow stem with the pestle, or the taut, papery skin of her hand as she plucked seeds from the flower's head. But my mother had not disguised her shop behind a false wall, and she had not slipped her remedies into vessels of dark red wine. She'd had no need to hide. The tinctures she dispensed were meant only for good: soothing the raw, tender parts of a new mother, or bringing menses upon a barren wife. Thus, she filled her register pages with the most benign of herbal remedies. They would raise no suspicion.

On my register pages, I wrote things such as nettle and hyssop and amaranth, yes, but also remedies more sinister: nightshade and hellebore and arsenic. Beneath the ink strokes of my register hid betrayal, anguish...and dark secrets.

Secrets about the vigorous young man who suffered an ailing heart on the eve of his wedding, or how it came to pass that a healthy new father fell victim to a sudden fever. My register laid it all bare: these were not weak hearts and fevers at all, but thorn apple juice and nightshade slipped into wines and pies by cunning women whose names now stained my register.

Oh, but if only the register told my own secret, the truth about how this all began. For I had documented every victim in these pages, all but one: *Frederick*. The sharp, black lines of his name defaced only my sullen heart, my scarred womb.

I gently closed the register, for I had no use of it tonight, and returned my attention to the letter. What worried me so? The edge of the parchment continued to catch my eye, as though something crawled beneath it. And the longer I remained at my table, the more my belly ached and my fingers trembled. In the distance, beyond the walls of the shop, the bells on a carriage sounded frighteningly similar to the chains on a constable's belt. But I assured myself that the bailiffs would not come tonight, just as they had not come for the last two decades. My shop, like my poisons, was too cleverly disguised. No man would find this place; it was buried deep behind a cupboard wall at the base of a twisted alleyway in the darkest depths of London.

I drew my eyes to the soot-stained wall that I had not the heart, nor the

strength, to scrub clean. An empty bottle on a shelf caught my reflection. My eyes, once bright green like my mother's, now held little life within them. My cheeks, too, once flushed with vitality, were sallow and sunken. I had the appearance of a ghost, much older than my forty-one years of age.

Tenderly, I began to rub the round bone in my left wrist, swollen with heat like a stone left in the fire and forgotten. The discomfort in my joints had crawled through my body for years; it had grown so severe, I lived not a waking hour without pain. Every poison I dispensed brought a new wave of it upon me; some evenings, my fingers were so distended and stiff, I felt sure the skin would split open and expose what lay underneath.

Killing and secret-keeping had done this to me. It had begun to rot me from the inside out, and something inside meant to tear me open.

At once, the air grew stagnant, and smoke began to curl into the low stone ceiling of my hidden room. The candle was nearly spent, and soon the laudanum drops would wrap me in their heavy warmth. Night had long ago fallen, and she would arrive in just a few hours: the woman whose name I would add to my register and whose mystery I would begin to unravel, no matter the unease it brewed inside of me.

2

Caroline

Present day, Monday

I wasn't supposed to be in London alone.

Celebratory anniversary trips are meant for two, not one, yet as I stepped out of the hotel into the bright light of a summer afternoon in London, the empty space next to me said otherwise. Today—our tenth wedding anniversary—James and I should have been together, making our way to the London Eye, the observation wheel overlooking the River Thames. We'd booked a nighttime ride in a VIP capsule, replete with a bottle of sparkling wine and a private host. For weeks, I'd imagined the dimly lit capsule swaying under the starry sky, our laughter punctuated only by the clinking of our champagne glasses and the touching of our lips.

But James was an ocean away. And I was in London alone, grieving and furious and jet-lagged, with a life-changing decision to make.

Instead of turning south toward the London Eye and the river, I headed in the opposite direction toward St. Paul's and Ludgate Hill. Keeping my eyes open for the nearest pub, I felt every bit a tourist in my gray sneakers and crossbody tote bag. My notebook rested inside, the pages covered in blue ink and doodled hearts with an outline of our ten-day itinerary. I'd only just arrived, and yet I couldn't bear to read through our made-for-two agenda and the playful notes we'd written to one another. *Southwark, couples' garden tour*, I'd written on one of the pages.

Practice making baby behind a tree, James had scribbled next to it. I'd planned to wear a dress, just in case.

Now I no longer needed the notebook, and I'd discarded every plan within. The back of my throat began to burn, tears approaching, as I wondered what else may soon be discarded. Our marriage? James was my college sweetheart; I didn't know life without him. I didn't know myself without him. Would I lose, too, my hopes for a baby? The idea of it made my stomach ache with want of more than just a decent meal. I longed to be a mother—to kiss those tiny, perfect toes and blow raspberries on the round belly of my baby.

I'd walked only a block when I spotted the entrance of a pub, The Old

Fleet Tavern. But before I could venture inside, a rugged-looking fellow with a clipboard and stained khakis waved me down as I passed him on the sidewalk. With a wide grin on his face, the fiftysomething-year-old said, “Fancy joining us for mudlarking?”

Mudlarking? I thought. *Is that some kind of dirt-nesting bird?* I forced a smile and shook my head. “No, thank you.”

He wasn’t so easily deterred. “Ever read any Victorian authors?” he asked, his voice barely audible over the screech of a red tour bus.

At this, I stopped in my tracks. A decade ago, in college, I’d graduated with a degree in British history. I’d passed my coursework with decent grades, but I’d always been most interested in what lay *outside* the textbooks. The dry, formulaic chapters simply didn’t interest me as much as the musty, antiquated albums stored in the archives of old buildings, or the digitized images of faded ephemera—playbills, census records, passenger manifest lists—I found online. I could lose myself for hours in these seemingly meaningless documents, while my classmates met at coffee shops to study. I couldn’t attribute my unconventional interests to anything specific, I only knew that classroom debates about civil revolution and power-hungry world leaders left me yawning. To me, the allure of history lay in the minutiae of life long ago, the untold secrets of ordinary people.

“I have read a bit, yes,” I said. Of course, I loved many of the classic British novels and read voraciously through school. At times, I had wished I’d pursued a degree in literature, as it seemed better suited to my interests. What I didn’t tell him was that I hadn’t read any Victorian literature—or any of my old British favorites, for that matter—in years. If this conversation resulted in a pop quiz, I’d fail miserably.

“Well, they wrote all about the mudlarkers—those countless souls scrounging about in the river for something old, something valuable. Might get your shoes a bit wet, but there’s no better way to immerse yourself in the past. Tide comes in, tide goes out, overturning something new each time. You’re welcome to join us on the tour, if you’re up for the adventure. First time is always free. We’ll be just on the other side of those brick buildings you see there...” He pointed. “Look for the stairs going to the river. Group’s meeting at half two, as the tide’s going out.”

I smiled at him. Despite his unkempt appearance, his hazel eyes radiated warmth. Behind him, the wooden plaque reading The Old Fleet Tavern swung on a squeaky hinge, tempting me inside. “Thank you,” I said, “but I’m headed to a...another appointment.”

Truth was, I needed a drink.

He nodded slowly. “Very well, but if you change your mind, we’ll be exploring until half five or so.”

“Enjoy,” I mumbled, transferring my bag to the other shoulder, expecting to never see the man again.

I stepped inside the darkened, damp taproom and nestled into a tall leather chair at the bar. Leaning forward to look at the beers on tap, I cringed as my arms landed in something wet—whatever sweat and ale had been left before me. I ordered a Boddingtons and waited impatiently for the cream-colored foam to rise to the surface and settle. At last, I took a deep drink, too worn-out to care that I had the beginning of a headache, the ale was lukewarm and a cramp had begun to tug on the left side of my abdomen.

The Victorians. I thought again about Charles Dickens, the author’s name echoing in my ears like that of an ex-boyfriend, fondly forgotten; an interesting guy, but not promising enough for the long haul. I’d read many of his works—*Oliver Twist* had been a favorite, followed closely by *Great Expectations*—but I felt a subtle flash of embarrassment.

According to the man I’d met outside, the Victorians wrote “all about” this thing called mudlarking, and yet I didn’t even know what the word meant. If James were here next to me, he’d most certainly tease me over the gaffe. He’d always joked that I “book-clubbed” my way through college reading gothic fairy tales late into the night when, according to him, I should have spent more time analyzing academic journals and developing my own theses about historical and political unrest. Such research, he’d said, was the only way a history degree could benefit anyone, because then I could pursue academia, a doctorate degree, a professorship.

In some ways, James had been right. Ten years ago, after graduation, I quickly realized my undergraduate history degree didn’t offer the same career prospects as James’s accounting degree. While my fruitless job search dragged on, he easily secured a high-paying job at a Big Four accounting firm in Cincinnati. I applied for several teaching roles at local high schools and community colleges, but as James had predicted, they all preferred an advanced degree.

Undeterred, I considered this an opportunity to delve further into my studies. With a sense of nervous excitement, I began the application process to attend graduate school at the University of Cambridge, just an hour north of London. James had been adamantly against the idea, and I soon knew why: just a few months after graduation, he walked me to the end of a pier overlooking the Ohio River, fell to a knee and tearfully asked

me to be his wife.

Cambridge could have fallen off the map, for all I cared—Cambridge and advanced degrees and every novel ever written by Charles Dickens. From the moment I wrapped my arms around James's neck at the end of that pier and whispered *yes*, my identity as an aspiring historian rusted away, replaced with my identity as his soon-to-be wife. I tossed my graduate school application into the trash and eagerly thrust myself into the whirlwind of wedding planning, preoccupied with letterpress fonts on invitations and shades of pink for our peony centerpieces. And when the wedding was but a sparkling, riverfront memory, I poured my energy into shopping for our first home. We eventually settled on the Perfect Place: a three-bed, two-bath home at the end of a cul-de-sac in a neighborhood of young families.

The routine of married life fell evenly into place, as straight and predictable as the rows of dogwood trees lining the streets of our new neighborhood. And as James began to settle onto the first rung of the corporate ladder, my parents—who owned farmland just east of Cincinnati—presented me with an enticing offer: a salaried job at the family farm, handling basic accounting and administrative tasks. It would be stable, secure. *No unknowns*.

I'd considered the decision over the course of a few days, thinking only briefly of the boxes still in our basement, packed away with the dozens of books I'd adored in school. *Northanger Abbey. Rebecca. Mrs. Dalloway*. What good had they done me? James had been right: burying myself in antiquated documents and tales of haunted manors hadn't resulted in a single job offer. On the contrary, it had cost me tens of thousands of dollars in student loans. I began to resent the books that lay inside those boxes and felt sure my notion about studying at Cambridge had been the wild idea of a restless, unemployed college graduate.

Besides, with James's secure job, the right thing to do—the *mature* thing to do—was to stay put in Cincinnati with my new husband and our new home.

I accepted the offer at the family farm, much to James's delight. And Brontë and Dickens and everything else I'd adored for so many years remained in boxes, hidden in the far corner of our basement, unopened and eventually forgotten.

In the darkened pub, I took a long, deep drink of my ale. It was a wonder James agreed to come to London at all. While deciding on anniversary destinations, he'd made his preference known: a beachfront resort in the Virgin Islands, where he could waste away the days napping

beside an empty cocktail glass. But we'd done a version of this daquiri-drenched vacation last Christmas, so I begged James to consider something different, like England or Ireland. On the condition that we not waste time on anything too academic, like the rare book restoration workshop I'd briefly mentioned, he finally agreed to London. He relented, he said, because he knew visiting England had once been a dream of mine.

A dream which, only days ago, he'd lifted into the air like a crystal glass of champagne and shattered between his fingers.

The bartender motioned to my half-empty glass, but I shook my head; one was enough. Feeling restless, I pulled out my phone and opened Facebook Messenger. Rose—my lifelong best friend—had sent me a message. *You doing okay? Love you.*

Then: *Here's a pic of little Ainsley. She loves you, too. <3*

And there she was, newborn Ainsley, swaddled in gray linen. A perfect, seven-pound newborn, my goddaughter, sleeping sweetly in the arms of my dear friend. I felt grateful she'd been born before I learned of James's secret; I'd been able to spend many sweet, content moments with the baby already. In spite of my grief, I smiled. If I lost all else, at least I'd have these two.

If social media was any indication, James and I seemed like the only ones in our circle of friends who were not yet pushing strollers and kissing mac-and-cheese-covered cheeks. And although waiting had been tough, it had been right for us: the accounting firm where James worked expected associates to wine and dine clients, often logging eighty-some hours per week. Though I'd wanted kids early in our marriage, James didn't want to deal with the stress of long hours and a young family. And so just as he had climbed the corporate ladder every day for a decade, so too did I put that little pink pill on the tip of my tongue and think to myself, *Someday*.

I glanced at today's date on my phone: June 2. Nearly four months had passed since James's firm had promoted him and put him on the partner track—which meant his long days on-site with clients were behind him.

Four months since we decided to try for a baby.

Four months since my *someday* had arrived.

But no baby yet.

I chewed at my thumbnail and closed my eyes. For the first time in four months, I felt glad that we hadn't gotten pregnant. Days ago, our marriage had begun to crumble under the crushing weight of what I'd discovered: our relationship no longer consisted of just two people. Another woman had intruded on us. What baby deserved such a predicament? No baby deserved it—not mine, not anyone's.

There was one problem: my period was due yesterday, and it had not yet shown. I hoped with all my might that jet lag and stress were to blame.

I took a final look at my best friend's new child, feeling not envy but unease about the future. I would have loved for my child to be Ainsley's lifelong best friend, to have a connection just like the one I had with Rose. Yet after learning James's secret, I wasn't sure marriage remained in the cards for me, let alone motherhood.

For the first time in ten years, I considered that maybe I'd made a mistake at the edge of that pier, when I told James yes. What if I'd said no, or not yet? I highly doubted I'd still be in Ohio, spending my days at a job I didn't love and my marriage teetering precariously over the edge of a cliff. Would I have lived somewhere in London instead, teaching or researching? Maybe I would have my head stuck in fairy tales, as James liked to joke, but wouldn't that still be better than the nightmare in which I now found myself?

I'd always valued my husband's pragmatism and calculated nature. For much of our marriage, I viewed this as James's way of keeping me grounded, safe. When I ventured a spontaneous idea—anything falling outside of his predetermined goals and desires—he'd quickly bring me back to earth with his outline of the risks, the downside. This rationality was, after all, what had propelled him forward at his firm. But now, a world away from James, I wondered for the first time if the dreams I once chased had been little more than an accounting problem to him. He'd been more concerned with *return on investment* and *risk management* than he'd been with my own happiness. And what I'd always considered sensible in James seemed, for the first time, something else: stifling and subtly manipulative.

I shifted in my seat, pulled my sticky thighs from the leather and flicked off my phone. Dwelling on home and the what-could-have-been would do me no good in London.

Thankfully, the few patrons inside The Old Fleet Tavern found nothing amiss about a thirty-four-year-old woman alone at the bar. I appreciated the lack of attention, and the Boddingtons had begun to ease its way through my aching, travel-worn body. I wrapped my hands tightly around the mug, the ring on my left hand pressing uncomfortably against the glass, and finished my drink.

As I stepped outside and considered where to go next—a nap at the hotel seemed much-deserved—I approached the place where the gentleman in khakis had stopped me earlier, inviting me to go...what was it, mudlurking? No, *mudlarking*. He'd said the group planned to meet just

ahead, at the base of the steps, at half-past two. I pulled out my phone and checked the time: it showed 2:35 p.m. I quickened my step, suddenly rejuvenated. Ten years ago, this was exactly the sort of adventure I might have loved, following a kind old British fellow to the River Thames to learn about the Victorians and *mudlarkers*. No doubt James would have resisted this spontaneous adventure, but he wasn't here to hold me back.

Alone, I could do whatever I damn well pleased.

On my way, I passed the La Grande—our stay at the swanky hotel had been an anniversary gift from my parents—but hardly gave it a second glance. I approached the river, easily spotting the concrete steps leading down to the water. The muddy, opaque current in the deepest part of the channel churned as though something toiled underneath, agitated. I stepped forward, the pedestrians around me moving on to more predictable ventures.

The steps were steeper and in much worse condition than I would have believed in the center of an otherwise modernized city. They were at least eighteen inches deep and made of crushed stone, like an ancient concrete. I took them slowly, grateful for my sneakers and my easy-to-carry bag. At the bottom of the steps, I paused, noticing the silence around me. Across the river on the south bank, cars and pedestrians rushed past—but I could hear none of it from this distance. I heard only the soft lapping of the waves at the river's edge, the chime-like sound of pebbles swirling in the water and, above me, the lonely call of a seagull.

The mudlarking tour group stood a short distance away, listening attentively to their guide—the man I'd met on the street earlier. Steeling myself, I stepped forward, moving carefully amid the loose stones and muddy puddles. As I approached the group, I willed myself to leave all thoughts of home behind: James, the secret I'd uncovered, our unfulfilled desire for a baby. I needed a break from the grief suffocating me, the thorns of fury so sharp and unexpected they took my breath away. No matter how I decided to spend the next ten days, there was no use remembering and reliving what I'd learned about James forty-eight hours ago.

Here in London on this “celebratory” anniversary trip, I needed to discover what *I* truly wanted, and whether the life I desired still included James and the children we'd hoped to raise together.

But to do that, I needed to unbury a few truths of my own.