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TEENAGER, DATE, **KILLER.**  
WHAT'S THE REAL STORY?

# PROM MOM

LAURA LIPPMAN


'One of the best crime novelists writing today.'

**PAULA HAWKINS**



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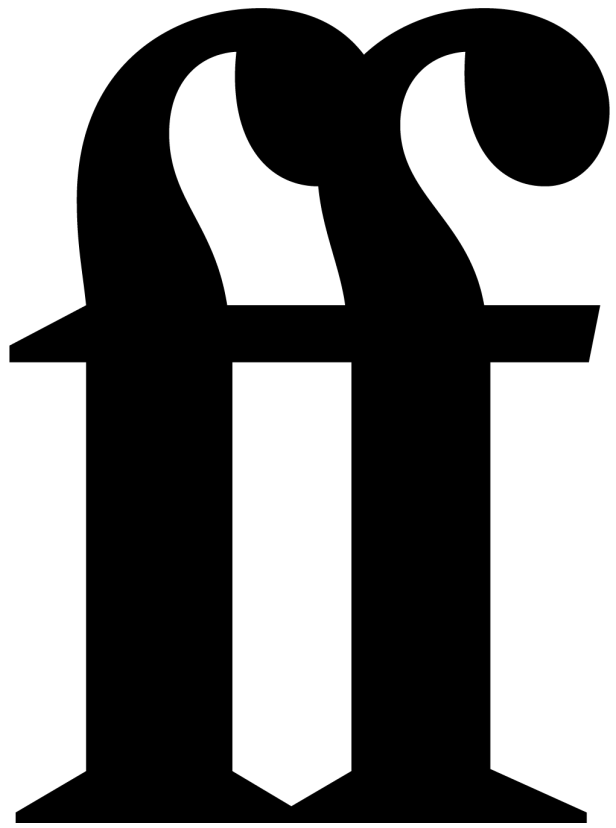
A photograph of a school hallway with rows of red lockers on both sides. In the center, a double door with glass panels is set into a dark wall. A handprint is visible on the right glass panel. The floor is dark and reflective, showing the lockers and the door. The lighting is dramatic, with blue and purple hues.

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PROM MOM

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*This book is for everyone, 2021–2022,  
who texted, emailed, or DM'ed me:*

“How are you doing?”

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

By the Same Author

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PART I  
BEFORE

*What was she thinking?*

MAY 1997

## The Girl

The lights were off in the bathroom, but the door was ajar and sunlight had begun seeping into the room. The day came at Amber in a series of unpleasant sensations. Hard—she was lying on the floor. Cold—she had on only her strapless bra, the floor was tile, the air conditioning had been set low.

*Sticky.* That was the blood. So much blood. She didn't know a body could lose this amount of blood without going into shock. Maybe she *was* in shock? She had taken a first aid course at the Y and remembered what to do for someone else in shock—get them to lie down, elevate the legs—but no one ever told you how to know if you yourself were in shock. Besides, she was already lying down.

“Joe? Joe?”

No answer. He wasn't here, of course. Why hadn't he tried to check on her? Was he so busy mooning over his ex-girlfriend that he couldn't be bothered to see if Amber was going to rally and make it to the after-party? He must have gone without her—fair enough, given how she had demanded the only room key and bolted from the prom, never to return, but couldn't he at least have pretended concern?

*He doesn't really like you,* her mother had said when Amber had told her about the invitation. *Not in that way.* That's okay, Amber had replied, and it had been okay, because she believed it was only a matter of time before he realized he did like her. She had thought it would happen last night.

Instead, she had rushed up to the room alone, assuming she was sick from the crab ravioli at dinner. The ravioli and the swigs of whatever had been in Zach's flask, although she had tried to take only the tiniest swallows, what her stepfather called "nips." No one could get drunk from those little sips, those nips, could they?

Her head was pounding with a cartoon frenzy and it was impossible to separate what had really happened last night from what she wanted to believe had happened. Her stomach had started cramping badly about twenty minutes into the dance, but she had ignored it until Joe danced with Kaitlyn "for old times' sake." Amber felt as if she was about to throw up, and that had to be done in privacy, always. "Give me the room key," she had demanded, her fear and shyness making her sound rude, imperious, as if she was mad at Joe.

She *was* mad at Joe.

Back in the room, she had taken off her dress and laid it across the bed, fearful it would be stained. She then crouched by the toilet in her bra and underwear, waiting to vomit.

She was still by the toilet, but she had not vomited.

She struggled to a sitting position. There was so much she couldn't remember, so much she couldn't forget, and those opposing camps warred with each other until her thoughts were more jumbled than ever. Her situation would make more sense if this were a dream, because, as in a dream, nothing made sense. She should be waking up in the bed, next to Joe, not on this sticky bathroom floor. She shouldn't be waking up at all, because the plan had been to stay up all night. When she had never come back downstairs, the others had probably gone on without her to the after-party. But why hadn't Joe come back to change into the more casual clothes he had brought for the trip to the reservoir? How could he not have checked on her, even once?

She pressed her palms against her temples, then into her eyes, not wanting to see what the creeping daylight would reveal. She would have to take care of things, take care of herself. It wasn't Joe's fault Amber had

gotten sick, even if it was watching him dancing with his ex, Kaitlyn, that had prompted her to keep bringing the flask back to her mouth. And it wasn't Joe's fault that the sudden pain had made her desperate to be alone. She didn't want to throw up in the public ladies' room adjacent to the ballroom. She could imagine nothing worse than other girls listening to her retch.

Now she could.

There was nothing left to do but drag herself to her feet and turn on the bathroom light.

*Oh god, oh god, oh god.*

*You can do this.*

The voice kicked in, the voice that had been with her all her life, telling her what to do when no one else had any advice for her. It was the voice that had told five-year-old Amber to wait quietly in the bookstore where her mother left her while she shopped. The voice that said, *Say nothing*, when she was accused of cheating on a test because her grade was so high. To pretend ignorance when a teacher asked who might have defaced her locker.

*Clean first, then shower.*

She worked quickly, using all but one of the bath towels, then took a shower. She changed into the clothes she had packed for the activities that had been planned for the morning. If the evening had gone as anticipated, she'd be at the Towson Diner right now, having eggs and hash browns and maybe a Diet Coke. Twenty-four hours earlier, her gravest worry had been that the others would tease her for not liking coffee.

Joe's overnight bag was on the luggage rack, zippered. Why hadn't he come back to the room? *Kaitlyn*, she thought miserably. *Kaitlyn*. He obviously still yearned for her, despite everything that had happened between Amber and him over the past year.

She left the prom dress behind, draped across the bed. She hated abandoning it, but it would be ruined if she tried to put it in her bag—crushed, maybe even stained—and she had too far to walk to carry it over

her shoulder. Besides, it would look odd, walking down York Road on a Saturday morning, a party dress slung over her shoulder. *Don't draw attention to yourself*, the voice told her. *Just try to get through the day. Maybe it will be all right. You don't really remember doing anything, so maybe you didn't.*

She wore rayon pants with a small floral print, elasticized at the waist, a loose-knit yellow T-shirt, and lace-up espadrilles, which were flat, but not particularly good for walking, and she already had blisters from the shoes she had worn the night before. How thoughtfully, how pridefully, she had assembled this outfit, stalking bargains at stores she seldom could afford. She had chosen the espadrilles because their pale green color uncannily matched the tiny pistils of the flowers on the pants and the laces made her feel dainty, like a ballerina. She had not expected to be walking far in them. What had she expected? The after-party downtown, then back to the hotel to change into this very outfit, sunrise at Loch Raven, breakfast at the Towson Diner. They had pledged not to sleep a single minute until they were home, reunited with their own beds.

Of course, that was before Joe had danced with his ex-girlfriend and Amber had started feeling those weird stomach pains and gone up to the room. She honestly couldn't remember what had happened after that. There was no denying what she had seen in the room, but she had no memory of it. She was in shock. She should see a doctor. No, she should *not* see a doctor.

When she reached Regester Avenue, she lingered for a moment on the sidewalk, regarding her house as a stranger might see it. The small, treeless front yard was decorated for spring—the five plaster geese that marched in formation year-round, from biggest to smallest, wore gingham-checked sunbonnets; the second largest, presumably the mother, had a matching apron. A month ago, there had been Easter baskets and giant eggs, but those had since been replaced by flowers, real and fake. In early June, right before Flag Day, the yard would be transformed into a bower of patriotism, all red, white, and blue, which stayed up past the

Fourth. August brought a back-to-school theme. Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Winter Wonderland, Valentine's Day, Spring. Amber knew that most people found her stepfather's house tacky, even creepy, but she had always taken comfort in the way the calendar marched through their front yard, the constancy of the geese. Every season, every month, the geese were always there.

Her stepfather was in the kitchen, reading the paper. Rod asked if she had a good time at the prom. "It was fine," she said. He had been her stepfather for ten years, but she never stopped feeling a little shy around him, a perpetual guest in his home. Her mother was always emphasizing how *lucky* Amber was that Rod treated her like his own daughter, and the consequence was that Amber didn't feel she was worthy of his kindness and attention at all, much less his love.

She went straight to bed, which was to be expected, as her mother and Rod assumed she had been up all night. The hotel rooms were changing stations, really, or so the parents had been told. They also were told that the girls would be staying in one room, the boys in another. Had they believed it? Amber had almost believed it, until she saw the flat glare in the eyes of Susannah, Zach's date. "Of course we're not staying in the same room," she said. She was smiling, there was no edge to her voice, but the look in her blue eyes unsettled Amber.

Amber put her bag in the room reserved and paid for by Joe's parents, while Zach stowed his bag in the one that Susannah's parents had provided. It was the nicest hotel Amber had ever been in, but then, the only hotel Amber had ever visited was a motel in Ocean City, where she, her mother, and Rod crowded into a one-room studio the last week of every June, when the Atlantic was still cold and the rates were low. She wouldn't have minded if she and Joe had a little time in this room, just the two of them. They'd been alone only once since January, in late April, the day they had agreed to go to the prom together.

Who had Joe danced the last dance with? Kaitlyn? But Kaitlyn had a date, the college boy she had been seeing since last summer. *Just a dance?*

she had asked Joe when she came up to their table. *For old times' sake?* Amber's heart had lurched at how Joe's face lit up. In that moment, she realized how Joe looked when he loved someone. He had never looked at her like that. But he liked Amber; she knew he liked her. He had told her things he had never told other people, not even Zach. They had something special, even if they had never defined it.

In her own bed, with the Laura Ashley comforter her mother had found 90 percent off at C-Mart, she fell into a dreamless sleep in spite of herself.

It was past noon when she came downstairs for a lunch of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches in pj shorts and a baggy T-shirt, hair tousled, traces of makeup still smeared on her face despite the vigorous shower she had taken at the hotel. She was glad, for once, that her mother was not the type to pepper her with questions. Rona asked only: "Well, was it everything you thought it would be?"

"No," Amber admitted, tipping a bag of pizza-flavored Goldfish into the soup. This was how she had eaten her soup since she was a child. The goldfish got soggy quickly, so you had to eat very fast, scooping them up with a spoon like some game at the Ocean City boardwalk.

"I tried to tell you. Boys like that Joe Simpson—"

"Mom, I have a headache."

"Were you drinking?"

She decided to tell the truth. *Tell the truth whenever you can*, her inner counsel advised her. "Only a little. And only because everyone else was."

"That's not like you, Amber."

It wasn't. Her mother had inadvertently hit on what had been bothering Amber since she had awakened on the bathroom floor. Amber was not the same person she had been twenty-four hours ago. She would never be that person again.

The police arrived while Amber and her mother were clearing the lunch dishes from the table. "Don't say anything, baby," her mother said, and Amber almost jumped out of her skin. But she already knew not to say too much. Anyone who watched television knew that.



The detectives, two men, said they needed to take her to see a doctor, which made Amber feel hopeful for a moment, that maybe the doctor could figure out what had happened, which still made no sense to her. Maybe she had some weird, unusual sickness and that would explain everything. But then she realized that would not be the point of the visit.

“Why does she need to see a doctor?” her mother asked.

“We believe your daughter delivered a baby last night, Mrs. Deluca.”

Impossible, her mother said. She’d know if her daughter was pregnant, she said. Amber felt the same way. It was impossible.

A maid had found a newborn wrapped in a towel on the floor of the bathroom in room 717. The room was registered to Joe Simpson, but he told police he had stayed out all night with his friends after his date got sick and locked herself in their room, taking the only key. He had tried to go to the room to change at about four a.m., but Amber wouldn’t open the door. He had breakfast with his friends at the diner and drove home from there.

“I woke up and the baby was dead,” Amber said, even as her mother and Rod shushed her.

*Did Amber want to tell them anything more about last night?* Amber shook her head no over and over again. She had nothing more to tell. She had said the only thing she knew to be true. She remembered nothing except pain, searing pain. Pain and blood and darkness, and then suddenly it was sunrise.

Still, she could ask a question, right? Asking them a question wasn’t the same thing as talking.

“My dress?”

“What about it?” asked one of the detectives, a Mr. Lenhardt, who had the kindest face she had ever seen, but maybe it was simply that Amber realized in that moment his would be the last kind face she would see for a long time. No one was ever going to be kind to her again.

“I left it behind in the hotel room. Do you think I could have it back, when everything is over?”

SEPTEMBER 19, 2019

Amber let the real estate agent lock the door of Rod's home, which was the only way she could ever think of the house on Regester Avenue. It was Rod's house, even if she and her mother had shared it with him for ten years. And now she would never have to enter the house again, not even for the closing, whenever that happened.

She had flown up from New Orleans two days ago, met with the lawyers, found a real estate agent, endured the walk-through, taken copious notes on her phone. When the agent was not actively disparaging the house, she crowed about how executing the punch list would cost less than \$5,000 and yield more than \$30,000 at sale. Less her commission, of course.

Amber had almost cried out, "I don't have \$5,000."

Then she remembered: She did. Or would, when Rod's estate was settled, almost a million dollars, an unfathomable amount of money in some ways, yet also *too* fathomable. Amber wasn't stupid. She was only thirty-eight, so a million dollars, amortized—was that even the right word?—over a lifetime was, at best, maybe \$20,000 a year. Or, if she invested the \$1 million and it yielded 3 percent every year, that would be \$30,000. Nothing to sneeze at, but it wouldn't keep you in unlimited Kleenex either.

It was enraging, now that she thought about it, how little a million dollars meant. People on reality shows, the competitive ones, were forever saying the prize money would change their lives, but now Amber had won the prize without even trying and she couldn't see how her life would be different. She grossed almost \$25,000 a year from her Etsy shop, augmenting those earnings with her gallery job and shifts at the Upperline. Maybe she could quit the Upperline now, but she wasn't sure

she wanted to. The goose had laid the golden egg, yet she was more dissatisfied than she had been before she knew such eggs existed. Would she finally go to Paris, that long-ago dream? No, she had come to terms years ago with the fact that Paris was never meant to be.

Still—*a million dollars*. How had Rod saved a million dollars, above and beyond the equity in his house, which also would be Amber's? Her mother would be furious if she knew her second husband had been able to put away that much money, given how modestly they had lived. But Veronica "Rona" Deluca had died ten years ago, bequeathing her daughter nothing but a vague suggestion that Amber was responsible for the cancer that ravaged her, if only because it was connected to her reproductive system. "This is what I get for having a kid," was one of the last things Rona ever said to Amber, in one of their monthly phone calls.

If it hadn't been for Rod, Amber wouldn't have even bothered to come home for Rona's funeral. That had been her last trip to Baltimore, in and out as quickly as possible.

"Do we really need to replace the venetian blinds?" Amber asked the agent as they sped away from the house in her cherry-red Lexus. Regester was one of the few east-west streets in this part of Towson that had no speed bumps, no traffic-calming curves. That was all you needed to know about Regester Avenue: Feel free to run over its kids.

"Honey"—she was almost a decade younger than Amber, yet treated her with a breezily patronizing air as infuriating as it was comic—"those blinds are the *worst*. They have to be at least twenty years old."

*Older. They were there when I was in junior high school.* But she didn't bother to say that. She typed into her Notes app: **Blinds must be changed.**

"And the garden figurines, the geese—what should I do with them?"

"Take them straight to the dump. No one wants that stuff."

Amber knew the real estate agent was right, but she almost winced on Rod's behalf. Even as a child, she had understood that Rod had too much stuff in his front yard, that people who talked about THAT house on

Register were not complimenting it. But the yard had made Rod happy, and young children loved it. In some ways, Rod's front yard was the first gallery of Amber's life. She had yet to meet anyone, whether in a gallery or a museum, who doted on their installations the way Rod had fussed over his yard.

Maybe she could sell the geese on Etsy. If only there were a Depop for yard art. Depop loved a good narrative.

The real estate agent turned right on York Road, heading north. "Are you from here?" Amber asked.

"Moved down after college," she said.

*That would be a no.* Amber disliked people who didn't answer yes-or-no questions with a yes or a no. "It's just that, to get to the airport, I would have taken York south—oh my god, stop, please stop."

"What?"

"Pull into this little strip center. I need to see something."

"Sure." Said with an eye roll of a tone, two drawn-out syllables ending on a sigh.

This particular strip center, built in a faux Tudor style that Amber thought of as fairy-tale quaint, had been the nexus of Amber's teenage years, bookended by a hardware store and a duckpin bowling alley. In between had been a toy store and a copying store. (Because people in the '90s had needed places to make copies. Funny to remember what a big deal it used to be, making copies.) And a Baskin-Robbins, where Amber had worked during high school.

Today, only the hardware store remained. The duckpin bowling alley was a restaurant. The Baskin-Robbins, where she had leaned into so many cartons of ice cream, feeling the cold on her cheeks and the burn of boys' gazes on her exposed cleavage, was a florist. The copying store was all poke bowls and acai smoothies, and the toy store was—*vacant*.

Vacant. Available. A blank canvas for someone with an imagination.

She got out of the agent's car and peered into the toy store, which, for all she knew, had led many lives over the past two decades. Think of how

many lives Amber had managed in the same time span. Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy. Felon, Student, Saleswoman, Gallerina, Waitress. The toy store's most recent incarnation appeared to have been some kind of clothing outlet. There were racks and hangers, nothing more. A plain white rectangle of a space, it could be virtually anything.

"How much would a property like this rent for?" Amber asked. "By the square foot?"

"I wouldn't know," the agent said. "I don't do commercial."

Amber took note of the number on the for lease sign, capturing it on her phone. Her flight was in three hours, and she had checked out of the hotel. But Rod's house was hers; the furniture was still in place. ("Arrange to sell furniture and stage house" was also in her Notes app.) She could sleep there tonight if necessary and, according to Southwest.com, switch her flight to the next day for only an additional \$30.

"You know what," she told the agent, "I realize there's one more thing I need to do before I leave town. I'll grab my bag from your trunk, if you don't mind, and then Uber to the airport later. I'll be in touch about getting the house ready for market."

"No rush," the agent said. "By the time we get through the punch list, it will be November, practically the worst time of the year to put a house on the market."

"Yes, well, I'm sorry my stepfather didn't think about that when he was dying."

The woman was immune to insults. It was downright admirable, this impenetrable ego that did not allow for the possibility that she could ever be the butt of a joke. How Amber longed for a skin that thick. She had always been self-conscious, even before she had anything to be self-conscious about. "Okay, I'll be in touch. I know a handyman who can do most of the things we discussed. I'll get the estimates and forward them to you."

There was a Starbucks on the west side of York Road. Amber crossed over, rolling her suitcase behind her, and called the leasing agent listed on