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MEET ME in PARADISE

a novel

Libby
Hubscher

*Meet Me
in
Paradise*



Libby Hubscher

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For my family,
who taught me to be careful
and inspired me to be brave,
in (mostly) equal measure

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Listen, are you breathing just a little, and calling it a life?

—Mary Oliver, “Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches”

One

MARIN

AT OUR MOTHER'S FUNERAL, I lost Sadie. One moment she was beside me, shaking hands with strangers who had come to tell us how sorry they were and wax poetic about our mother's appetite for life, the next she was gone. Sadie was like that, in perpetual motion. It never bothered me until that moment, because she hadn't been my responsibility before, but in that cathedral my mother would have detested with all those people who didn't really know us, I suddenly realized that I was the only person Sadie had left. I endured several endless moments in a silent panic, until her shoe struck me on the top of my head. I looked up and found her sitting on one of the oak rafters thirty feet above the crowd of mourners, swinging her legs back and forth like a child on a park bench. I said nothing. I wasn't about to climb up there and, besides, it would have been no use. Sadie didn't march to her own drummer . . . she was a regular one-girl Mannheim Steamroller, and she wouldn't come down until she was good and ready or she became so exhausted she lost consciousness and fell. Until then, all I could do was return to the awkward handshakes and hugs and worries.

That was twelve years ago. I'm thirty now, all grown up and a world-class professional worrier. I don't mind. Not really. For all her antics, Sadie is like the sun, warm and bright and singular. Anxiety is simply the price I pay to orbit around someone like her, someone amazing, who is constantly running off to climb some untamed mountain or photograph a never-before-seen tribe in a remote jungle. She feeds off adventure. I prefer fingernails, nibbling mine down to the quick while I wait for her to come back. Without her, I slog away the days, writing single-line advertising slogans for pet food companies and organic tampons all week. At night, I come home to our empty house and eat salad alone at the kitchen table, then I watch reruns until I fall asleep on the couch.

Don't get me wrong. Being Sadie's sister has its upsides, like her sharp wit, her unconditional love, and that wonderful balloon feeling I get in my

chest when I know her plane has landed back here in Chattanooga and I could just float away or burst from relief. It's why I always pick her up at the airport, despite her protests. I crave that moment, the one where Sadie's searchlight smile shines through the crowd and finds me. I never go anywhere, but in that moment, it's like I've come home instead of her. And she has no idea. She's too busy trying to keep those unruly blonde curls of hers out of her face as she practically dances her way toward the baggage claim to notice. I lived for that high. And I needed a fix now.

Sadie'd been in China for three months—actually ninety-two days, seventeen hours, and forty-one minutes, according to my watch—and I had lost my cuticles and much of my will to live. I'd gotten to the airport earlier than usual, a good forty minutes before her flight was due to arrive, but now an hour had passed and the digital display over the baggage claim showed her flight number. People filtered past me, picked up luggage from the conveyer belt, but Sadie didn't appear. I half expected her to put her hands over my eyes and pretend to be some sort of intriguing stranger like she sometimes had done when I was in college and studying at the library. I checked my phone for the eight hundredth time.

"Too busy sexting to notice your own sister?"

Sadie. I wrapped my arms around her. "Hey, wild one. I was worried you were never going to get here."

"*You* worried? I can't believe it." She batted her eyelashes at me. "You of all people should know I love a dramatic entrance. Too bad you spoiled the whole thing by staring at your phone." I drew in a relieved breath. Sadie sounded like Sadie. A little hoarse from the dry air on the plane, maybe, but her sense of humor was intact. I stepped back and looked at her. She'd felt strange in my arms, like part of her was still on the plane, and now I saw why. She was thinner. Her usually cherubic face looked drawn.

"Jesus, Sadie, did you not eat or sleep in China? You look like shit."

"Wow, thanks, Marin. You're so kind. You look fantastic too, by the way." She snatched up one of my hands and examined it. "I love this new manicure you're rocking. What's it called, the Anxious Gnaw?"

I reclaimed my hand. “Point taken. I thought you were going to some sacred temple to take pictures of monks. What was it called again?”

“Guangzhou Fuda.”

“Right. That was it. I guess I just didn’t realize you’d be roughing it this trip.”

“That’s one way of putting it.”

“You can tell me more about it later. Let’s grab your bag and get you home. Nothing a nap and a good meal won’t fix, right?”

Sadie gave me a tight-lipped smile and nodded. “Right.”

In the passenger seat, Sadie dozed off minutes into our ride home. I tried to remember how she looked after she’d climbed Kangchenjunga for that eco-extreme feature last year. Probably the same. When we got to the house, I carried her duffel bag inside for her while she slept in the driveway.

“Sadie,” I said, and unbuckled her seat belt. “We’re home.”

She rubbed her eyes. “Sorry. My body clock is totally off. What time is it anyway?”

“Noon.”

“It’s one a.m. in China right now.”

“I forgot about the time difference. I thought maybe you were coming down with something.”

Sadie shook her head and yawned. She followed me into the house and dropped onto the couch.

“Home sweet home.”

“I put your bag in the laundry room. There’s some take-out menus on the coffee table. I was thinking barbecue, but you can pick.”

Sadie touched the menus, but she didn’t pick them up. “I’m not really hungry. To me, it’s still the middle of the night.”

I snatched the Dave’s BBQ menu up and headed toward the phone. Sure, her stomach was on Shanghai time or whatever, but knowing Sadie, there was no way she was going to turn down ribs when they were sitting right in front of her.

“I get it,” I told her as I dialed. “Do you mind if I eat, though? I had to go into the office early to finish up a pitch for a new luxury pet accessory brand and skipped breakfast. I’m starving.”

When the food arrived thirty minutes later, I arranged it like a Tennessee wedding banquet on the coffee table. I even got out Mom’s good china that we only used for special occasions. The ribs were still steaming, sending sweet, spicy scented notes into the air. I eyed Sadie, waiting for the telltale nostril flare that would happen right before she grabbed the entire Styrofoam box and claimed it as her own, like some kind of ravenous alpha she-wolf.

“I’ll be back,” she said, and climbed off the couch.

“Where are you going?” I asked. Sadie was walking away from ribs?

“Bathroom.”

I sat on the couch in front of enough food to feed a football team, perplexed. Sadie never turned down Dave’s. Not at noon, not at midnight. Never. We always joked that she had multiple stomachs. One was always on call. I remembered reading something while I was on one of my insomnia-driven research binges, that in China you have to drink boiled or bottled water. Maybe she hadn’t followed that rule? Next to me, Sadie’s phone buzzed on the cushion. I picked it up. A text message flashed across the screen. It was from Jessica, the senior editor at the magazine. I didn’t mean to read it, but Sadie and I didn’t have secrets. Jessica had kept it short. Her text read: Let me know if there’s anything I can do.

Weird. Anything she could do, what was that all about? I stared at the screen for a moment. “Maybe I’ll have some of that brisket,” Sadie said.

I dropped the phone. “Great.” I picked up her computer and put it down in the middle of the buffet. “I charged your laptop—how about a Sadie Slideshow while we eat?” The screen came on and there was a picture of a man. He was bald, with tan, shriveled skin. Still, he was smiling.

“Maybe later,” Sadie said, closing the laptop. “I haven’t had a chance to cull yet.” She grasped a small piece of brisket between her fingers and placed

it on her tongue. “What? I had my hands full.”

“Was he one of the monks?”

“He was someone I met at Fuda.” I waited for her to elaborate. She always had such great stories about her subjects, but she was too busy dissecting another piece of meat with her fingertips.

“Are you sure everything’s okay?” I said.

“No. Everything is not okay. There’s not even close to enough barbecue sauce on this. Dave’s off his game.”

“I meant with you.”

She waved a hand at me before dumping an entire container of barbecue sauce over the meat in front of her. “You worry too much.”

“I know I do. It’s just one of the areas in which I excel,” I said. My anxiety was almost a running joke between us, except when it wasn’t. I turned my attention to the tub of coleslaw and started making a mountain on my plate. “Did something happen in China? You can tell me. I promise not to freak out.”

“Nope,” she said. “Nada. Zilch. *Méi Shì*. I picked up a little Mandarin, does that count? Turns out you’re not the only brainiac in the family.”

“That’s great.” I smushed the coleslaw mountain with my fork. “I just wonder if you could use a little break from all this crazy travel and these hard-core assignments.”

She shrugged. “I love that stuff.”

“I know you do. But you’ve been on the road all year . . . Peru, then Canada, now China for months. You barely had time to call, and when you did, it was like five minutes. And”—I chose my words carefully—“you have to admit you look a little run-down.”

“You’ve got me there. I am a little tired. And I’m sorry. I love my work, but I love you too. And I missed you, Mar, even if I’m a shit who doesn’t video call as often as I should to let you know that.” Sadie was quiet for a long time. She poked at the brisket on her plate. “Tell you what, let’s take a long weekend somewhere warm and beautiful and relaxing, just you and me. We’ll finally put that emergency passport of yours to use. We can get

massages and bankrupt the all-you-can-eat buffets. I'm thinking froufrou drinks on a beach and meaningless sex with pool boys."

"Since when have you ever known me to do any of those things?" I asked.

She gave me a look. "Please. I know you and Ted used to get it on. It's a small house. Good acoustics." She gave an exaggerated gasp. "Is it possible that it's been so long you've forgotten?"

"Not all of us are as libidinous as you. And besides, Ted and I were in a serious relationship. It wasn't meaningless."

"Fine. Come with me and have *meaningful* sex with pool boys. It's just what the doctor ordered . . . Or, Jessica had said something about another assignment for me. What was it . . . hmm . . . Russia maybe, no . . ." Sadie tipped her head to the side. She was really milking this. She tapped her forehead. "Not Venezuela. Oh! I remember now, Papua New Guinea. You know, small island near Australia. Ever heard of it?"

"You're messing with me."

Sadie shook her head. "Would I do that? Nope. Three months with a tribe in the highlands. And snakes. Lots of bad ones there. So much venom."

Maybe it was envisioning Sadie surrounded by a slew of venomous jungle creatures, but I caved, faster than I'd like to admit. "Fine."

She flashed me one of her famous exaggerated expressions; this one I titled "complete shock plus palpitations" based on the drop of her jaw and the hand on her heart. "Marin Cole," she said. "Did you just agree to a beach trip?"

"What can I say?" I told her as I put my arm around her shoulder and pulled her toward me. "You are a force that is futile to resist, Sis."

She bumped me with her shoulder and said, "Don't you worry about a thing. It's going to be perfect. Just leave the whole thing to me."

I didn't know what I'd been thinking earlier; she was the same old Sadie. The mischievous glint was back in her eyes. "Famous last words," I said. "Pass the hush puppies."

Two

SADIE

I GUESS I SHOULD start with why did I plan this? I'll tell you a story. One time, when I was in high school, our house caught on fire. I can't remember what caused the fire exactly—a faulty wire, a shorted-out kitchen appliance, me leaving a pot of my famous sauerkraut soup cooking on the stove overnight—it's not important. My older sister, Marin, woke up to the shriek of the alarm and a smoke-filled hallway. She's always been a light sleeper. I, on the other hand, could sleep through the apocalypse. It's practically a superpower of mine. My memory of the fire is just shreds of moments, tiny recollections here and there. Pain in my arms. Marin's upside-down face streaked with black. Her robe on my cheek. How cold the air was outside. Flashes of red light. The things we had to throw away because of the water and smoke damage, pictures of Mom that we couldn't replace. We never talked about it. For Marin, talking about her death made it more real. I only knew what happened because a firefighter told me. I slept through the whole thing. If Marin hadn't gotten me out, I wouldn't have made it.

She saved me.

I was asleep and in trouble and she dragged me out.

All this to say, this is my way of dragging her out. Marin's been sleeping for a long time, and our house is on fire.

Three

MARIN

THE ENTIRE POPULATION OF Tennessee seemed to be at the Nashville airport, everyone, that is, except for Sadie. In classic form, something had come up at the last minute and she'd promised to get a ride with a friend. For the past half hour, I'd been scanning the crowd, tapping my boarding pass in my hand, and checking the time on my phone on repeat—in that order. And now, our flight was due to start boarding any minute. This wasn't fashionably late, this was missing-the-flight-without-a-miracle late. Of course, I'd insisted on being at the airport the recommended two and a half hours early. Sadie, on the other hand, still hadn't completely unpacked from China. None of this was surprising. She was the spontaneous, carefree yang to my admittedly uptight yin. Somebody had to keep shit together.

I took my phone out and tapped off a quick message. If being a pain in the ass was a sport, you'd be a gold medalist. Where the hell are you? You're going to miss the trip, you know, the one you insisted we take!

Then I remembered that the whole reason I agreed to this last-minute sisters' getaway was to spend time with her. That and I'd come up with a plan to convince her to quit the magazine and come work with me at the advertising firm where I was employed—we needed a photographer, she was a photographer . . . it was perfect. A couple of Bahama Mamas, a little pool boy flirtation, and Sadie would be putty in my hands. *Play nice*, I told myself. Delete. Delete.

Where the heck are you??????

Not quite there. I tweaked the verbiage the way I did for my ad campaigns. Think about the target consumer, what do you want them to feel? How will you make them want to buy what you're selling? Sadie wasn't a customer, exactly, but it was the same idea. I needed Sadie in a good mood so she'd finally take my advice to find a more stable job in town.

Where are you, Sis? Hope everything is okay.



It wasn't perfect, but if I took any longer our nonrefundable tickets would be worthless. I hit send.

A voice crackled over the airport loudspeaker. I couldn't make out what the gate attendant was saying, so I turned to a woman nearby who was tucking a magazine into her purse.

"Sorry. Could you hear that announcement? I missed it."

"Oh yeah, totally. It said, Island Air to St. Maarten, first-class passenger boarding. I only know 'cause I'm going there for my honeymoon. As soon as my husband gets out of the bathroom, I've got a glass of champagne with my name on it. How about you?"

"Oh, um, yeah. Same. Well, not the honeymoon or husband part. Just a quick getaway . . . with my sister." Who still had not shown up. And had not yet bothered to respond to my text. Basically the opposite of a husband. For a brief moment, I let myself wallow a little in the memory of my ex-boyfriend, Ted—the closest I'd come to a husband, a college boyfriend who . . . well, we'd really liked each other, even if it wasn't meant to be. It's funny the things that you remember. He had a great laugh. I missed that. And he could wear the heck out of a baseball hat.

The woman's husband arrived then, wearing a white hoodie with *Mr. Right* emblazoned across the chest in shiny gold script. She stood and revealed her own coordinated sweatshirt, a very pale pink with the same gold script *Mrs. Right* across the chest.

"Here he is!" the woman said, grinning, and then grabbed a fistful of that hideous sweatshirt to pull him in for a kiss. They were sort of cute in their coordinated outfits, if not slightly vomit-inducing. Heat rose in my cheeks and I wondered momentarily if it would be super rude to flee. Instead, I did what everyone does in those uncomfortable situations and took out my phone again. I started a new text to Sadie, and this time, I decided not to sugarcoat the situation.

Do I need to remind you that sisters' trip is plural? The plane is boarding. You'd better be through security soon or you won't make it.

No answer.

Next to me, the couple was still going at it. It was impressive, actually—they didn't seem to need air. Mrs. Right threw a pink-tracksuit-clad leg over Mr. Right's. *Okay, you're in love. You're on your honeymoon, we get it.* I picked up my leather carry-on. As I walked away, I started to feel a little bad for my mental tirade.

"Congratulations!" I called back, but it sounded awkward, even to me.

On the other side of the carpeted waiting area, I found a spot against a large pillar near the line that was forming beside the Jetway entrance. From where I stood, I couldn't see the Rights, but I would be able to spot Sadie and her trademark bouncing curls as soon as she got through security. *If she got through security.* I smoothed a hand over the sleeveless emerald silk blouse I was wearing. I'd felt good putting it on this morning, but it suddenly seemed like a stupid choice for the trip. *Don't wear your usual business stuff,* Sadie had said. *You know, the kind that makes you look like a high school principal. Wear something cute. Green. You look great in green. Now let's talk about underwear,* Sadie'd gone on. I'd told myself that I was going to go along with her suggestions until I had her back in Tennessee for good, but I'd had to cut her off there with a promise that I'd buy some new clothes. The blouse had been a compromise, along with a pair of linen pants. Ann Taylor was the right look in any situation, wasn't it? I glanced down at the pants. Did anyone actually wear linen in real life? Why was it a thing? They were wrinkled already, and though I was fighting an irresistible urge to buy an iron in the airport and fix them, I understood their plight. I was starting to feel a bit wrinkled myself.

My phone dinged. Finally, Sadie had texted me back.

I'm close, but if I don't make it, I'll get the next one. Go ahead without me. XO

Go ahead without me? Just like that, like it was no big deal, like I did it all the time. Was this Sadie's idea of a sick joke? I took an intentionally deep breath. While Sadie'd been in China these past few months, I'd downloaded a meditation app and started using it. In-two-three-four. Out-two-three-