


ALWAYS THE QUIET ONES



a Novel

JAMIE LEE SOGN

AUTHOR OF SALTHOUSE PLACE

**ALWAYS
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QUIET
ONES**

OTHER TITLES BY JAMIE LEE SOGN

Salthouse Place

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First edition



To Danielle, my Sea Star and my dearest friend

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Chapter 1

Monday

Some days it astonishes me how much effort it takes to be alive.

It's my normal morning routine. Every day for years now, I've lined up the bottles in my medicine cabinet, then gone through them one by one until I have all the pretty pills in my palm. It looks like a lot, but it's not nearly as much as I used to take; now I can swallow them all in one go. I don't even get sick from them anymore; that is, unless I miss a dose, and I hardly ever do.

On my worst days, these little colorful ovals and circles simply prop me up and help me get through the hours so I can get back into bed as soon as possible. But on decent or even good days, when I think I might not need them, the medication reminds me that I've gone through a lot to get here.

I think today is going to be a good day.

There's something about being the first one up in the morning, that still, quiet calm of a day about to unfold. It's a mirrored surface of water that I can slowly slip my finger into before the ripples break up my reflection.

This morning, I take some extra time to tame my thick black hair, running my long locks through a flat iron. Normally, I would throw my unruly mane into a ponytail and call it good. After I straighten, I put some hair oil into my palms and then run my fingers through my hair for extra shine. As for the face, I only do a little mascara and blush, and I'm ready to go.

I stand in front of the coffee maker and listen to the gurgle in between the raindrops pattering at the kitchen window. It's a mess outside. It was storming all night, and there's no sign of it stopping anytime soon. Nothing unusual for Seattle in March, though.

I add a splash of nondairy creamer to my coffee and stand against the counter, cradling the drink and letting my brain boot up to the sound of a rainy Monday morning. Normally, I would be annoyed if I had to leave the house for the office; this would be a perfect day to take this coffee and curl up in front of the TV and catch up on my latest shows. This morning I can't wait to get to work.

Down the hall, I hear a door crack open.

"Bea?" a voice calls. "Is that you?"

I smile. There goes my quiet morning. "Who else would it be, Mom?" I reply. "Besides Dad, I'm the only other person living here." I pop out the spent coffee pod and throw it into the smelly counter compost canister, then reload the coffee machine. "Coffee's almost ready."

Mom comes into the kitchen, followed closely by Dad. "Morning, Buzz!" he says, using the nickname I've had since I was a toddler, when I spent two weeks straight in August refusing to wear anything other than a bumble-*Bea* costume. "Hey, you look nice today."

I'm a little pleased he's noticed. "Thanks. I think it's gonna be a good day at work. I kind of wanted to dress up."

"What's going on?" asks Mom. She's wearing a fluffy robe; her shoulder-length black hair is already brushed; the odd gray cluster of hairs peeks through. She's not wearing any makeup, but her natural high cheekbones and flawless skin would fool most about her age.

We share the same round face and big eyes, shaped like marquise diamonds and as brown as the coffee I'm drinking. We share the same body shape, too; when I cried at eleven years old and wished I was as bone thin as the white girls in my class, she told me I would be thankful when I got older that I had hips and a backside that curved like the mountains of the nearby Cascades. She was right. Though neither of us could have accounted for the Kardashians happening.

I smooth my hands over my high-waisted black pants, which hug said curves—it's the nicest pair I have. "My boss *might* have hinted at something special happening this week," I say, looking down. "Like a promotion . . ."

Mom squeals, and Dad, not a foot away from her, winces, then smiles. “That’s my girl!” he says.

“Finally,” Mom laments. “You should have been promoted years ago, Bea! That it took this long to give you credit—”

“Well, it’s only because a senior associate just left, so now there’s a spot open.”

Mom raises an eyebrow. “Hasn’t he promised you the promotions before, when other spots came open? Like . . . for the last five years?”

Dad moves closer to Mom and puts an arm around her, a silent signal for her to bring it down a notch. She wrinkles her nose and looks up at him, while he simply smiles softly back. “Let her have her moment,” he says.

“Well, Landon has a lot of good attorneys in the office to choose from. Besides, he’s really busy, and maybe I’m not as flashy or vocal about my wins.” I’m not sure why I’m defending my boss, since she’s 100 percent correct. “But this time he told me I would be promoted. He promised. This is going to be an exciting week. Granite Holdings is coming in for our final bid presentation tomorrow, and we’ve been trying to steal them away from Saul Group for ages. If they end up hiring us and ditching Saul Group, it’s going to be a huge deal.”

My phone dings, and I check my texts. It’s Greg Farrell, my colleague: **Thanks again for finishing up that memo for me last night!**

I type back quickly, **Sure thing! How’d the date go?**

Three bubbles appear and then a quick response back. **Good! And she made a mean scramble for brekky this morning if you kno what i mean.**

I get it yeah. So second date plans?

Wut. no, she’s not my type. Btw, did you get those most recent numbers for the Granite presentation incorporated into the deck? Hope it wasnt a pain!

Not at all!

It was a bit of a pain. Honestly, I didn't mind finishing the deck by myself. The truth was that even if Greg had done his slides and given them to me, I would have been up late proofreading and correcting his work anyway.

"Bea?"

I snap back to attention and put my phone down. "Huh?" I say.

"I said once Granite hears about the brilliant newly minted senior associate, I know they'll be asking where to sign," Dad says.

Mom claps her hands. "I know! You should call Allegra and go out for celebration drinks! She'll be over here this evening anyway."

My mood instantly sours. "Why is *she* coming over?" I ask. "Besides the need to spread her endless propaganda on how amazing pregnancy is?" Allegra is a childhood friend of the family—her family and mine grew up going to church and school together. She's also Filipino, so we were basically contractually obligated to hang out together.

Mom clicks her tongue. "She's coming to help make the lumpia for the church fundraiser this weekend! And, Bea, I don't know why you always have to make that face about her, huh? You two used to be such good friends."

"Yeah, in high school, Mom." I glance at the clock. "I have to go." While I genuinely like her, we have grown into different people, and Mom constantly trying to rekindle our girlhood friendship is irritating. While I'm single and still live with my parents, Allegra curates an Instagram-perfect life. Though if I thought she was annoying before, I couldn't have prepared myself for how insufferable she would become when she got pregnant. I'm convinced Allegra would stay pregnant for the rest of her life if she could. She is one of those uncanny women who actually does *glow* during pregnancy.

I imagine Allegra with her grown-up life, and I can't relate at all. I try not to think about it and insist to everyone and myself that I don't care. But

how can I not care? How can I not be hurt when she is living this perfect life and sharing it with, of all people, Caleb?

It's true, Allegra and I were good friends a long time ago. But that was before . . . everything. Before the pills, before Caleb Crown, before my family lost it all trying to save me.

When it was all different.

"Go get 'em, girl!" says Dad. "Big things!"

I give a wave to Mom and Dad as I leave the house and let the bright-red door of our small home swing shut behind me. I step lightly down the porch stairs—the third one down has been broken for months.

Just like I'm not the person I used to be, we live in a different house now from the one I grew up in.

I still remember it: a two-story brick Tudor, and an entryway with a hanging lantern that always looked so big to me as a little girl. Mom grew roses outside that house, and we were always throwing parties. That house had a red door too. But then we lost it. I mean, I lost it for us. Unable to afford the mortgage anymore, we moved. When I left for law school, my parents moved into our rambler, with a dirt driveway that my parents have been meaning to pave ever since.

I remember when we painted the door here red, too, maybe in a bout of hope that we could re-create what we'd had in the Tudor. Mom has tried growing roses here, but they've never taken, even though Father Cristobal came and threw holy water and prayers at all her garden tools and each square inch of soil. I think Dad still looks at Zillow estimates for the Tudor, which is well over a cool million now thanks to Seattle real estate.

Now the neighborhood we live in is somewhere in the middle of the gentrification that's overtaken Seattle and all its suburbs. The three houses on the corner were bought up last year and demolished, to be replaced with stylish condo buildings. They stand in cold geometric opposition to the humble single-family homes surrounding them. A spin studio is opening down the road, which Dad claims is the official beginning of the end.

Beginning of what and end of what, he's never actually specified, but the increase in the property tax bill last year made us all do a double take.

Once I got the job at BCC, I took over most of our mortgage. It seemed the least I could do for my parents. We still have medical debt from the accident, and debt from the loans they took out to pay the lawyers. Not to mention my law school loans on top of it all.

Things are different. Sometimes Mom and Allegra don't see that, or won't. I don't blame Allegra. I made my own choices, which turned me into who I am today. I blame Caleb Crown a little, though—maybe a lot. And the fact is that I would have never met Caleb if it hadn't been for Allegra Montoya.



I feel the blast of cold and wet air long before I reach the top of the staircase at the downtown University Street station. Behind me and back past the line of morning commuters, groggy eyed and clutching their morning coffees with desperate fingers, the Seattle Link light-rail train speeds away with a groan. I shrug off the past and get back to the present.

Walking along the busy downtown sidewalk of Fifth Avenue, I'm not sure which will sweep me away first, the rain or my own excitement. Because today, all my hard work and my parents' sacrifice will finally be paying off. Sure, the promotion means a bonus and a salary increase, but what the promotion means most is validation that I'm no longer the person I used to be.

I get to my office building, a new glass skyscraper that looks like a crescent moon cutting into the sky. In the elevator, I push the button for the fiftieth floor. The doors open up to a lush modern lobby with a bronze plaque front and center as you enter that reads "Bellingham, Charles & Chan."

The receptionist greets me. "Congratulations on the award, Bea! We saw in the morning email announcements." I beam.

"The morning announcements?" I repeat.

She nods. "Yeah, it's exciting."

"Thank you!" I breathe. It's done. It's already been announced.

I've gotten a little past reception and into the lobby when I notice the crowd gathered in the normally vacant space. Every inch of cream-colored faux leather seating is taken up by suits, and I can't even see past the sea of black and gray to the normal panoramic views of Puget Sound. I'm taken aback when I see my own boss, Landon Laurie, at the head of the room, speaking. I catch the tail end of a sentence. "I can assure you, nobody is more deserving."

Is this all . . . for me?

I move past a couple of people, and they glance to me, then back to Landon; I'm not even sure these people know who I am . . . and they don't seem to care about my arrival. No, whatever this is, it isn't for me. I backtrack to the reception area.

"Sorry," I say. "What were you congratulating me for?"

She blinks. "Oh, it said you're getting some pro bono award." She reads my clueless face. "At the Legal Aid gala next week?"

"Oh right," I say, remembering I did receive some email about that a while back. Nothing special, I just clocked fifty hours of pro bono work through the Seattle Legal Aid offices. "So why the party?" I ask, gesturing to the crowd.

"Greg's getting promoted! Landon just announced he's the newest senior associate!"

My mouth drops open, and I turn just in time to see Greg standing to join Landon at the front of the crowd. Landon shakes his hand, and they both dole out shit-eating grins to the group, which bursts into applause.

Greg. Who was just chatting with me and didn't say anything.

Greg. Who never gets his work done on time and is constantly leaning on *me* for help.

And Landon. My boss, who just last week promised me that I would be getting the promotion. The boss who's overlooked me for five years is now patting the back of a mediocre man who joined the same time as I did.

There *is* someone more deserving than Greg.

It's me.

At the announcement of celebratory donuts in the break room, the crowd disperses. Except for me. I stand in the lobby and watch Landon and Greg walk together right toward me. They're talking and laughing and don't even notice me. I step aside to let them pass me by. "Congrats, Greg," I say quietly. They don't even hear me.

I'm so disappointed I could cry.

I'm so angry I could kill.

Chapter 2

I sit at my desk and stare at my inbox. I can hear Monday-morning chatter spill in through my glass office walls; from the other side of my office window, I can hear the rain, which hasn't let up outside. The drops pelt my window with a useless kind of anger. I usually have a view all the way to the water, in between buildings at least, but right now I can barely see the building next door to us in the rain and fog.

On my screen, I've been staring at the morning announcement email for who knows how long now. Greg's promotion is top billing, with a write-up with his picture and a quote from Landon about how Greg is "promising, a brilliant legal mind, and the only golfer who's come close to beating me at Pacific Dunes at the BCC Summer Men's Retreat!"

I feel ill.

I scroll down to find my own name in bold under a section titled "Other News."

Save the date for the annual Legal Aid gala, sponsored by Bellingham, Charles & Chan. Junior Associate Bea Ku to accept an award.

A buzz from my phone jolts me back to the present. A text from Mom on our family group chat. **CONGRATULATIONS Bea!**

It's followed quickly by one from Dad: **That's my girl!** He adds a GIF image of a dancing bumblebee.

I leave them on read and bury my head in my hands. Do I talk to Landon? Greg? What do I do? I decide my best strategy is to wait for a sinkhole to appear under my office chair, but after nearly twenty minutes of waiting, I accept it's no longer an option.

"Are you okay, Ku?"