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SEDIEM BER



A NOVEL

CARISSA ORLANDO

SEPTEMBER HOUSE

CARISSA ORLANDO

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About the Author

This book is dedicated to the good folks in the psychology department at the University of South Carolina, who encouraged me to publish something but weren't specific as to what.



t was our dream house.

I knew it from the moment I stepped onto the property for the real estate tour. I knew it from the moment I saw the listing in the newspaper, if I'm being honest. The tour was a formality. I would have bought the place sight unseen.

The house, however, was truly something to see. It was a Victorian, with cobalt paint and neat white trim and an envy-inspiring porch that wrapped around the whole house. The driveway was long and the yard was sprawling and the place was blissfully isolated, hidden by trees on all sides. And there was a turret—an actual *turret*—that made the house look just a step behind in time, but purposefully so. My feet had barely even touched a pebble in the driveway before I knew that this place was my—*our*—home.

I had never really had a real home before, even as a child. My family had moved around quite a bit, bouncing from house to apartment back to a house and once even to a little trailer for a while—it all depended on how things were going and whether or not my father was taking his medication. The older I got, the more I found myself wishing for something permanent, a house with heavy bones, a place where I could sink my roots into the ground and become an immovable object. Leaving the chaos of my family seemed to be a step towards this dream, although in retrospect it might have been a touch naive to expect any level of stability in my twenties. I didn't exactly find my house and my roots, but I found a husband, which seemed to be close enough.

Hal understood the draw of a house, of a home. His family had also been transient to an extent, and from the time we were newlyweds, Hal and I shared fantasies of owning a gorgeous old house, preferably Victorian. We waxed poetic about him tapping away at novels in an office filled with rich wood, me creating masterpieces in a sun-drenched studio, our child playing delicately in a lush backyard. We would fill the home with antique furniture and throw lavish parties, casually reciting the history of each corner of the house to our admiring guests. We would maybe even be included in one of those magazines that featured historic homes, photographed as we posed in our luxurious sitting room, then again in the master bedroom, then again in the greenhouse (of course we would have a greenhouse), a centerfold for a

different type of fantasy. More than that, we wanted a house—a home—that was nothing but ours. A place where we could live and grow old and die.

Of course, married life never quite proceeds in the direction you imagine. Hal had difficulty getting his writing published and had to cobble together employment through freelance-writing gigs, crafting little fluff articles for the local paper, and teaching a few classes at a community college. I balanced raising our daughter, Katherine, with odd jobs—retail, administrative assistant, substitute teacher. I painted when we could afford art supplies. We were transient like our families before us, bouncing from house to apartment to house to different apartment as circumstances dictated—always renting, never owning.

But after some struggles (and what family doesn't have struggles?), it all started coming together as Katherine approached her late-teenage years. Hal sold a few of his books and received modest but steady royalties from them. I was painting with more frequency and had some pieces displayed in a local gallery. We found a little house to rent that was in a decent state of repair, with a landlord who didn't jack up the rate too terribly over the years. We settled in, decorated the place to our liking, and for a while it almost felt like ours. Almost. By the time Katherine left for college (full scholarship, my smart girl), we had found stability, but had put aside our dreams of getting a place of our own, old Victorian or not. It was no matter—we were one another's home, and that was more than enough at times. Harold, Margaret, and Katherine Hartman—a transient family of three.

We weren't really even looking to buy anymore. Who knows what compelled me to flip to the real estate section of a newspaper I rarely read, but there the house stood in all its beauty. Victorian, just like we had wanted. Impossibly old. Impossibly beautiful. And for a price so low that Hal triple-checked it with the real estate agent before we even scheduled a tour.

The house would need minor restorations; that was certain. Still, for a place that hadn't been occupied since the nineties, when its possession was unceremoniously turned over from the last owner back to the bank, it was in surprisingly good repair. The house was nearly a hundred fifty years old but had aged gracefully, appearing composed and wise instead of decaying and haggard. A paint touch-up here, some wood refinishing there, and the place would be as good as new.

As the real estate agent guided us through the house, Hal and I gawked like children, pointing out where furniture would be placed, claiming rooms for our own. Hal picked a grand room on the second floor as his office and decided where in the room his desk would sit before the real estate agent

even made it up the stairs after us. I had claimed the sunroom as my studio from just a photo in the listing, and was already imagining myself painting away through sunny afternoons. And of course, we both agreed that our master bedroom would be at the top of the stairs, where we would wake and stare out the gorgeous picture window.

"I am legally obligated to disclose to you that there was a death in this house," the agent said, still catching her breath as she caught up to us on the third floor but not so out of sorts as to accidentally use the word "murder." "Well, two deaths. The lady of the house and a housekeeper. But it was over a hundred years ago."

We were barely listening, busy picturing ourselves sipping morning tea in bed, looking out that window.

"That was a long time ago," Hal said dreamily.

"Yes, it was," the agent said. "And the homeowner at the time, the man who . . . you know. Well, it seemed as if he had been suffering from some sort of psychosis. He later took his own life. A real one-off sort of situation."

"A house this old, you would almost expect something like that," I said, not even listening to my own words as I peered inside the closet. The *closet*!

"And the other deaths in the house," the agent said, her voice so quiet as to be barely a sound, "seemed to be natural in nature."

I didn't hear her because Hal had just called me into the bathroom, and I was nearly moved to tears by the claw-foot tub. The agent seemed relieved by our lack of follow-up questions and the tour continued.

I didn't care much for the basement—unfinished and windowless, with dirt floors and a dank smell. It had a bit of a *wrong* sense to it, and I felt goose bumps break out, but I figured that it was just the cold air and dim lighting. We commented to each other that we would have to finish it after we moved in, install flooring and do something about the light and the smell. There was a half-hearted tone to our plans for the basement even then, and I was relieved to notice that we wouldn't have much reason to go down there—the water heater and the boiler were in a utility closet towards the back of the house; the breaker box was in the kitchen. We didn't spend too much time down there and didn't notice that the agent remained at the top of the stairs, peering down at us from the well-lit hallway.

Then we got a look at the backyard and forgot about the basement entirely.

Maybe if the two of us had paid more attention to any of the horror movies we'd seen over the years, we would've been aware of how thick we were being, but we hadn't and we weren't. Instead, we bought the house and celebrated with champagne (for me) and sparkling cider (for Hal). We finally had a house that was ours, just *ours*. To live and grow old and die in. Katherine was surprised but happy when we broke the news to her, and she promised she would visit once she could take time away from her new, high-paying job and her new, high-achieving girlfriend.

This is all to say, we were home. This is all to say, you would have had to pry us out of this house with a goddamn crowbar. Me, anyway. As it turned out, Hal could be dislodged a little more easily.

The first few weeks we lived in the house were blissful. But then, of course, it was only May.



he walls of the house were bleeding again.

This sort of thing could be expected; it was, after all, September.

The bleeding wouldn't have been so bad if it hadn't been accompanied by nightly moaning that escalated into screaming by the end of the month like clockwork. The moaning started around midnight and didn't let up until nearly six in the morning, which made it challenging to get a good night's sleep. Since it was early in the month, I could still sleep through the racket, but the sleep was disjointed and not particularly restful.

Before Hal absconded to wherever it was he went, he used to stretch and crack what sounded like the entirety of his skeleton. *Margaret*, he would say, we're getting old.

Speak for yourself, I would reply, but he was right. I was starting to feel a bit like the house itself sometimes—grand but withering, shifting in the wind and making questionable noises when the foundation settled. All the moaning-and-screaming business in September certainly didn't help me feel any younger.

That is to say, I was not looking forward to late September and the nightly screaming. It was going to be a long month. But that's just the way of things.

As for the bleeding, it always started at the top floor of the house—the master bedroom. If I wasn't mistaken, it started above our very bed itself. There was something disconcerting about opening your eyes first thing in the morning and seeing a thick trail of red oozing down your nice wallpaper, pointing straight at your head. It really set a mood for the remainder of the day. Then you walked out into the hallway and there was more of it dripping from in between the cracks in the wallpaper, leaking honey-slow to the floor. It was a lot to take in before breakfast.

As early as it was in September, the blood hadn't yet made it to the baseboards. Give it a week, however, and it would start pooling on the floor, cascading down the stairs in clotting red waterfalls. By the end of the month, deft footwork would be required to walk down the hallway or descend the stairs without leaving a trail of prints throughout the house. I had grown practiced in dodging blood over the past few years, but even I had slipped up

on occasion, especially once the screaming was in full effect. Sleep deprivation really takes a toll on your motor functioning.

I used to worry over the walls, getting a bucket and soap and scrubbing until my arms were sore, only to see my work undone the very next day. By the end of the month, it got so bad that I could rub the sponge over a crack in the wallpaper and watch a fresh blob of red leak out of the open wound that was the wall over and over again. *The wallpaper is ruined*, I fretted, but it never was. It all went away in October. So now I just allowed the walls to bleed and waited patiently.

The first year we were in the house, Hal tried to convince me that the bleeding was just a leak. An oozing red leak. He carried on with that line of reasoning much longer than was logical. By the time the blood had poured down the stairs and Hal was almost ready to admit that maybe it wasn't a simple leak, October hit and the blood vanished. Hal considered it a problem solved. I suppose he thought it was an isolated event and never considered that these things might be cyclical. He seemed surprised when the blood returned that second September. *There's that leak again*, he mused, fooling nobody. Everything, of course, changed after the third September, and Hal's opinions about the bleeding during this fourth September could be best summed up by his abrupt absence. I supposed I ought to feel trepidatious about facing September alone. However, I was never quite alone in this house, now, was I?

I COULDN'T TELL YOU WHY THE WALLS BLED. I COULDN'T TELL YOU WHY

there was screaming at night. I couldn't tell you why a lot of things happened in this house. Over the years, I had developed a few working theories about the goings-on and why September made everything so much more difficult, but each was half-formed at best. Eventually, one has to give up asking questions, just accept that things are the way they are, and act accordingly. So when I woke up to a wall dripping with blood and to a foggy head from not-quite sleeping through hours of moaning, I simply nodded and got on with my morning.

My only plan for the day was to try to get some painting done. I had learned from past experience that it became difficult to focus on painting or really much of anything as the month progressed, what with the sleep deprivation and the blood and the loud noises and the wounded children running everywhere. As such, I wanted to front-load my pleasures in the hopes that they could carry me through the remainder of the month. Planning is important. So I set myself up in my sunroom studio with a blank

canvas, hoping for inspiration. However, I soon found myself staring at a canvas painted entirely in red, which seemed a bit derivative, given the circumstances.

I tapped my paintbrush against my lips and stared at the red canvas, plotting out what to paint. It might have been nice to do a nature scene—some peaceful flowers, waving trees—but all I saw in my mind's eye was a child's face, mutilated and screaming. Perhaps painting was not in the cards for today.

A dull headache poked its way behind my eyes—a foreshadowing of the near-incessant headache I would have by the end of the month—and I sighed, giving up. I plopped my paintbrush, dry and useless, down on my easel and stood. Tea. It was time for tea.

As I walked from my studio into the living room, I could hear Fredricka moving around upstairs, doing something or other in the second-floor bedrooms. I knew all the doors were closed along that hallway (*What will we ever do with a five-bedroom house, Margaret?* Hal had asked me when we reviewed the listing. *We'll have guests,* I had responded, a rare moment of prescience for me), but I could still hear noises from within, different from the usual disturbances that arose from behind those closed doors. Jostling and rustling, the changing of linens. The scraping of furniture across the floor in one room, then a light crash coming from another. Fredricka was lively today.

September had an effect on Fredricka. She became busier, more chaotic. She was nervous. She didn't like September, she told me once. She had seen more than a hundred Septembers, so she ought to know.

For her part, Fredricka expelled her September energy through cleaning, stacking things, and rearranging furniture in nonsensical ways. None of these chores were necessary, but I understood her intentions. One has to control something in the face of the great uncontrollable. I left her alone.

Fredricka usually made the tea, but it seemed like it would be my responsibility today. A frown crept onto my face, and I reminded myself a bit of a spoiled child. I chastised myself for my entitlement. Making tea, after all, wasn't particularly burdensome, and it was a bit of good fortune to have Fredricka around at all, considering we hadn't hired her. She had come with the house, in a manner of speaking. Still, one gets used to routines. As I rounded the corner out of the living room and into the foyer, I tried to remember where we kept the tea bags. Fredricka might have moved them. She liked to move things in September, and not because she wanted to be helpful. For all I knew, they had been shoved behind the toilet.

Lost in my thoughts, I was startled to hear a voice behind me.

"Tea, ma'am?" Fredricka asked. Apparently, she hadn't been too distracted to make it, after all.

Despite my surprise upon learning that Fredricka was a nonnegotiable fixture of the house, I had come to realize that I enjoyed her presence. She was reasonably benevolent, or at least as benevolent as anything in the house could be. Still, the sight of her was always a shock to the system. Fredricka was a tall woman, and grand, in a way, as the house itself, with so much of her walled off and expressionless, unwilling to open and allow a peek of what lay inside. And of course, there was that gash on her head, gaping open like a split pumpkin, where the axe had sunk in over a hundred years ago. The wound began at the top of her forehead and stretched down through her right eyebrow. Her eye was sunken in as a result, pupil drifting, not quite right anymore. That took a while to get used to looking at.

I smiled at her. "I can handle it if you're busy."

"No trouble at all, ma'am." Fredricka drifted down the hallway that ran parallel to the stairs and led into the kitchen, her long smock fluttering behind her. I followed.

The kitchen was the brightest room in the house, surrounded with windows displaying the greenery outside, which was just now yielding leaves tinged with yellows and reds. It had been one of the biggest draws of the house for me, with two large ovens, a glimmering white sink, and rows of ornate cabinetry (original wood, mind you). It turned out to be comparatively peaceful in here, and I usually ate my meals at the kitchen table instead of in the grand dining room just a few feet away. For some reason, the blood never made it into the kitchen, so this room would be a particular haven as September raged on. A true blessing, that was; seeing blood staining those pristine surfaces, however temporarily, would have broken my heart. I'd grown used to seeing carnage inches from my food (Fredricka prepared most of the meals, after all), but one must draw a line somewhere.

Fredricka busied herself with the kettle, filling it with water and placing it on the stove. Not wanting to stand like a statue waiting for Fredricka to serve me, I walked over to the basement door just off the kitchen to check the wooden boards nailed into the doorframe. I had replaced them recently, but I tugged on each beam all the same, testing the strength. Four of them were firm, but one wiggled a little. I inspected the nails—just as I thought, coming loose. In the year since the boards had gone up, I found that the nails did that from time to time. Checking the boards was essential. I made a

mental note that the beam would need to be replaced soon. Not urgent, but best to act on these things sooner rather than later. I gripped the doorknob and gave it a tug. The door remained closed, held tight by the boards. I traced my finger over the small crack—a recent addition—that snaked down from the top of the door nearly midway to the doorknob, sharp but not large enough to threaten the integrity of the wood. Everything, for the most part, was as it should have been.

Turning back into the kitchen, I noticed that Elias had materialized next to the stove. I sighed. Elias could be a bit of a bother.

Elias was nine or ten. I could never remember. Whatever his age was, he was scrawny, with a smattering of unruly dark hair on his head. He always looked the same—gaunt and empty, his dirty white cotton shirt draping over dark shorts, and one sad knee sock dangling by his ankle. He stared at me with milky eyes and a sullen face. He didn't have any visible wounds like Fredricka, but could somehow be just as eerie, if not more. I couldn't interact with Elias the way I could with Fredricka, although God knows I'd tried: I tried asking him questions, telling him to tap his foot once for yes and twice for no; I tried asking him to move the planchette on a Ouija board; I even tried making outlandish statements about World War II just to get a rise out of him. Nothing. So I hate to say it, but I started treating him like a plant, narrating my life out loud to him with no expectation of him responding or even hearing. It looks like rain today, Elias. Oh, Elias, seems like the mail is running late. Not that we're expecting anything but bills, anyway. For his part, Elias just stared.

"Can I make you something to eat, ma'am?" Fredricka asked, busying herself around Elias as if he were not there. Elias and Fredricka had nothing to do with each other and I had never seen them interact. I had started to assume Fredricka didn't even see Elias until one day she referred to him as "that boy." No clues regarding Elias' perceptions of Fredricka were ever available, seeing as he never spoke, only howled periodically.

"Some toast, perhaps?" I responded. I moved to the pantry to retrieve the bread before Fredricka could get to it. We had an electric toaster, but Fredricka's ability to use technology popularized after her death was sporadic at best. I tried to teach her about the toaster and even had her successfully use it once, but her preference was to roast the bread on a toasting fork over a fire, like she used to do. It was muscle memory for her; she just did what she was always used to doing. I understood and even empathized (aren't we all creatures of habit in the end?) but the process took forever and I was hungry.

"I think we still have some strawberry jam." I motioned to the fridge. This would give Fredricka something to do. After months and months of trying to convince Fredricka that she had no obligation to be our housekeeper and was free to do whatever she wanted on this earth, I learned that all Fredricka seemed to be capable of doing was work, and all she wanted from me was to be given things to do. All right, then.

Elias watched me with those unblinking eyes as I retrieved the bread from the pantry and a plate from the cupboard. He was like the *Mona Lisa*, eyes following me about the room, expression unreadable. It had initially been unsettling, but one grows used to unsettling things.

Fredricka rummaged around in the fridge. "We do have strawberry jam, ma'am," Fredricka said. "Or, if ma'am prefers, we also have blackberry."

"Blackberry sounds good, actually." I turned with my bread and walked towards the toaster. Elias was standing directly in front of it, empty eyes leering into mine. This was going to be a problem.

"Excuse me, Elias," I said. Elias didn't reply or move, but I wasn't expecting him to. I reached past him towards the toaster. As my arm drew near, the white of Elias' face turned black, as if it had been on fire for a long, long time. His milky eyes boiled into embers and his mouth stretched into a gaping maw, fangs gleaming as he shrieked, diving for the flesh of my arm. Elias did *not* like his personal space invaded. However, I was practiced in this game, deftly dropping my bread in the toaster, pushing the lever, and retracting my arm in a matter of seconds, receiving only the lightest of grazes from Elias' fangs. Just a scratch, not even bleeding. No need to even apply hydrogen peroxide. This wasn't my first time trying to prepare a meal while dodging the fangs of a dead child who wished me bodily harm.

Upon being denied the chance to remove a section of my flesh with his teeth, Elias let out another shriek, which sounded like a dying jet engine. He vanished inside of himself, and the kitchen was again quiet, save for the sounds of Fredricka arranging jams on the counter behind me.

Most of the things in this house had left Hal alone, choosing to bother me instead of him for reasons I never quite understood or found fair. Elias had been the lone exception, taking his own version of a liking to Hal, which was a bit more violent than most people's version of a liking. I wasn't sure what the connection was, but Elias certainly enjoyed frequenting the room Hal had claimed as his office. I wondered if that room used to be Elias' playroom, or possibly the room in which he died. Regardless, Hal had not cared for Elias. I certainly understood his perspective, but I couldn't see the point of expending all that energy on hating something that, in the grand