

SURVIVE THE NIGHT



A NOVEL

RILEY SAGER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
HOME BEFORE DARK

ALSO BY RILEY SAGER

Final Girls

The Last Time I Lied

Lock Every Door

Home Before Dark

Survive the Night

A NOVEL

RILEY SAGER



DUTTON



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To all those wonderful people out there in the dark

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End Credits

About the Author

Fasten your seat belts. It's going to be a bumpy night.

—*All About Eve*

Fade in.

Parking lot.

The middle of night.

The middle of nowhere.

Beginning at the end, like a great film noir. Bill Holden dead in the swimming pool. Fred MacMurray giving his last confession.

Going full circle. Like a noose.

There's a car, a diner, a neon sign in the parking lot fading to streaks in the rearview mirror as the car speeds away. Inside are two people—a young woman in the passenger seat and a man behind the wheel. Both stare through the windshield to the road ahead, uncertain.

About who they are.

About where they're going.

About how they got here, to this precise moment in time. Just before midnight. The final seconds of Tuesday, November 19, 1991.

But Charlie knows what brought them to the cusp of this uncertain new day. As the situation unfolds frame by frame, like film through a projector, she knows exactly how it all happened.

She knows because this isn't a movie.

It's the here and now.

She's the girl in the car.

The man behind the wheel is a killer.

And Charlie understands, with the certainty of someone who's seen this kind of movie a hundred times before, that only one of them will live to see the dawn.

NINE P.M.

INT. DORM ROOM—DAY

Staying isn't an option.

That's why Charlie has agreed to get into a car with a perfect stranger.

She's promised Robbie—promised herself as well—that she'll bolt if anything about the situation strikes her as shady. One can't be too careful. Not these days.

Not after what happened to Maddy.

Charlie has already steeled herself for flight, mentally listing all the scenarios in which she should run. If the car looks battered and/or has tinted windows. If someone else is inside, no matter the excuse. If he seems too eager to depart or, on the flip side, not hurried enough. She's sworn—to Robbie, to herself, to Maddy, whom she still sometimes talks to even though she's now two months in the grave—that a single shiver of apprehension will send her running back to the dorm.

She doubts it will come to that. Because he seems nice. Friendly. Definitely not the type of guy who'd do the things that had been done to Maddy and the others.

Besides, he's not a stranger. Not completely. They'd met once before, in front of the ride board in the campus commons, dwarfed by that wall of flyers from students desperate to get home and those eager to drive them there in exchange for gas money. Charlie had just put up her own flyer—carefully printed, her phone number placed on each meticulously cut tab—when he appeared at her side.

“You're going to Youngstown?” he said, his gaze flicking from her to the flyer and back again.

Charlie hesitated before responding. A post-Maddy habit. She never willingly engaged with people she didn't know. Not until she had a grasp on their intentions. He could have been making small talk. Or trying to pick her up. Unlikely, but not entirely out of the realm of possibility. It was how she met Robbie, after all. She'd been pretty once, before guilt and grief had sunk their claws into her.

"Yeah," she eventually said, after his gaze returned to the ride board, making her decide he was there for the same reason she was. "That where you're heading?"

"Akron," he said.

Hearing that made Charlie stand at attention. Not quite Youngstown, but close enough. A quick stop on the way to his final destination.

"Rider or driver?" she asked.

"Driver. Was hoping to find someone willing to split the cost of gas."

"I could be that someone," she said, letting him look her over, giving him the chance to decide if she was the type of person he'd want to spend hours alone in a car with. She knew what kind of vibe she gave off—an angry dourness that would have made guys like him tell her to smile more if she hadn't looked like she'd punch them for doing so. Doom and gloom hovered over her like a rain cloud.

Charlie studied him right back. He appeared to be a few years older than the typical student, although that could have been a product of his size. He was *big*. Tall, broad-chested, square-jawed. Wearing jeans and an Olyphant University sweatshirt, he looked, Charlie thought, like the hero of a forties campus comedy. Or the villain in an eighties one.

She assumed he was a grad student like Robbie. One of those people who got a taste for college life and decided they never wanted to leave. But he had nice hair, something Charlie still noticed even though she'd let her own grow limp and scraggly. Great smile, too, which he flashed when he said, "Possibly. When were you looking to leave?"

Charlie gestured to her flyer and the four letters placed all-caps in the dead center of the page.

ASAP

He tore a tab from the bottom of the flyer, leaving a gap that brought to Charlie's mind a missing tooth. The thought made her shudder.

The man placed the torn-off tab in his wallet. "I'll see what I can do."

Charlie hadn't expected a response. It was the middle of the week in the middle of November, with Thanksgiving just ten days away. No one was looking to leave campus then. No one but her.

But that night, her phone rang, and a vaguely familiar voice on the other end said, "Hi, it's Josh. From the ride board."

Charlie, who'd been sitting in her dorm staring at the half of room that had once been filled with all things Maddy but now sat lifeless and bare, amused herself by responding, "Hi, Josh from the ride board."

"Hi—" Josh paused, no doubt checking the paper tab in his hand for the name of the girl he was calling. "Charlie. I just wanted to tell you that I can leave tomorrow, but it won't be until late. Nine o'clock. If you want, there's a space in the passenger seat with your name on it."

"I'll take it."

And that was that.

Now tomorrow is today, and Charlie is having one last look at the dorm room she'll most likely never come back to. Her gaze sweeps slowly across the room, making sure to take in every inch of the place she's called home for the past three years. The cluttered desks. The beds piled with pillows. The strand of fairy lights Maddy had put up their first Christmas and never bothered to take down, now in full twinkle.

The golden sunlight of an autumn afternoon streams through the window, giving everything a sepia glow and making Charlie feel both joy and sadness. Nostalgia. That beautiful ache.

Someone enters the room behind her.

Maddy.

Charlie smells her perfume. Chanel No. 5.

"What a dump," Maddy says.

A melancholy smile plays across Charlie's lips. "I think I—"
"Charlie."

INT. DORM ROOM—NIGHT

The sound of Robbie's voice from the open door breaks the spell like a finger snap. In a blink, the room has lost its magic. The desks are bare. The beds are stripped. The fairy lights remain, only they're unplugged and have been that way for months. At the window, Charlie sees not warm sunlight but a stark rectangle of darkness.

As for Maddy, she's long gone. Not even the faintest trace of her perfume remains.

"It's nine," Robbie says. "We should get going."

Charlie stands in the center of the room, still momentarily lost. How strange it is—how utterly jarring—to go from the picture in her mind's eye to harsh reality. There's no happiness left in this room. She sees that now. It's just a white-walled box that contains only memories now soured by tragedy.

Robbie watches her from the doorway. He knows what just happened.

A movie in her mind.

That Robbie's never been bothered by them is one of the things she loves about him. He knows her story, knows her obsessions, understands the rest.

"Did you take your pill today?"

Charlie swallows and nods. "Yeah."

"And you're all packed?" Robbie says, as if she's simply going away for the weekend and not, in all likelihood, forever.

"I think so. It wasn't easy."

She had spent most of the day sorting her things between two piles: take or leave behind. She ended up taking very little. Just two suitcases with all her clothes stuffed inside and a box filled with mementos and her beloved

VHS tapes. The rest went into boxes conscientiously placed in the middle of the room, making it easier for the custodian assigned to dispose of it all when they realize she's never coming back.

"You can take more time if you need it," Robbie says. "You don't have to leave tonight. And I can still drive if you're willing to wait until the weekend."

Charlie understands. But to her, waiting—even just a few more days—is as unthinkable as staying.

"I think it's too late to back out now."

She grabs her coat. Well, Maddy's coat. A hand-me-down from her grandmother accidentally left behind when the rest of her belongings were carted away. Charlie found it under Maddy's bed and claimed it as her own. It's vintage—from the fifties—and uncharacteristically dramatic for Charlie, who usually favors anything that makes her blend in with the crowd. Made of bright red wool, the coat has a massive collar shaped like butterfly wings that come together as Charlie buttons it to her chin.

Robbie takes her suitcases, leaving Charlie cradling the box and the JanSport backpack she uses instead of a purse. She doesn't lock the door behind her. Why bother? Her last act before departing is to wipe away the names scrawled in erasable marker on the whiteboard affixed to the door.

Charlie + Maddy

The words leave a smudge of ink on her palm.

They depart quickly and quietly, unnoticed by the other girls on her floor, most of whom are gathered in the TV lounge down the hall. Charlie hears the braying voice of Roseanne Barr, followed by canned laughter. Even though she never understood her dorm's television obsession—why watch TV when movies are so much better?—tonight Charlie welcomes the distraction. Her plan is to skip the goodbyes. Although she used to be good friends with many girls on her floor, that all ended the moment Maddy died. Now it's best to simply vanish. Here one moment, gone the next. Just like Maddy herself.

"This will be good for you," Robbie says as they ride the elevator to the first floor. Charlie notes the hollowness of his voice, making it clear he thinks

the opposite. “A little time away is all you need.”

In the three days since Charlie announced her intention to leave school, Robbie has remained sweetly in denial about what it means for them as a couple. Despite promises to be true to each other and hastily made plans for Robbie to visit Youngstown over Christmas break, Charlie knows the reality of the situation.

Their relationship is ending.

Not in a both-going-our-separate-ways way. Definitely not in a Rhett Butler “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn” way. But Charlie understands that some kind of breakup will be the inevitable result. She’ll be two states and four hundred miles away. He’ll still be at Olyphant, remaining, to use Maddy’s phrase after she’d first met him, a catch. Robbie Wilson, the campus math nerd and assistant swimming coach with the Richard Gere chin and the Brad Pitt abs. Already, girls are circling, eager to take Charlie’s place. She can only assume one of them will eventually succeed.

If that’s the price she must pay to get out of this place, then so be it. Her only hope is that she won’t eventually come to regret it.

EXT. DORM BUILDING—NIGHT

The dorm lobby is empty when they step out of the elevator. So is the snow-dusted quad they cut across on their way to the parking lot. Despite winter's arrival, windows are open in a few of the upper-floor dorms, leaking out the now-familiar sounds of campus life. Laughter. The beep of one of Olyphant's infamously unreliable in-room microwaves. Music played louder than dorm rules allow. Charlie recognizes the song. Siouxsie and the Banshees. "Kiss Them for Me."

Maddy had loved that song.

Once they're out of the quad and at the curb, Robbie drops her suitcases next to a streetlamp—the designated meeting spot.

"I guess this is it," he says.

Charlie braces for another variation of the conversation they've had a dozen times. Is she sure she needs to leave? Is there any possibility she could stick it out until the end of the semester?

Her answer's been the same every time. Yes, she has to go. No, she can't make it to finals. There was a time, shortly after Maddy died, when she thought such a scenario was possible.

Not anymore.

Now Charlie understands with soul-deep certainty that she needs to get the hell out of Dodge.

She's stopped going to class, stopped talking to friends, stopped almost every aspect of her previous life. A constant pumping on the brakes of her existence. Now it's time to start moving again, even if that movement is really just running away.

To his credit, Robbie doesn't make one last-ditch attempt to get her to stay. Charlie suspects she's worn him down. Now all that's left to do is say their goodbyes.

Robbie leans in for a kiss and a tight hug. Wrapped in his embrace, Charlie feels a stab of guilt about her decision to leave, which was caused by another, far different sense of guilt. It's a Russian doll of remorse. Guilt tucked into guilt that she's ruining the only thing that has yet to be ruined.

"I'm sorry," she says, surprised by the hitch in her voice that she's forced to swallow down. "I know this is hard."

"It's been worse for you," Robbie says. "I understand why you need to do this. I should have understood sooner. And what I hope happens is that your time away will be exactly what you need and that when the spring semester rolls around, you'll be ready to come back to me."

Charlie's hit with another pang of guilt as Robbie looks down at her with those huge brown eyes of his. Bambi eyes, Maddy used to call them. So round and soulful that Charlie couldn't help but be mesmerized the first time they met.

Although she suspects that initial meeting was probably mundane, her memory of it is like something out of a classic romantic comedy. It was at the library, she a sophomore strung out on Diet Coke and midterm stress and Robbie a ridiculously handsome first-year grad student simply looking for a place to sit. He chose her table, one that comfortably sat four but had been commandeered by Charlie and all the books she'd spread across it.

"Room for one more?" he said.

Charlie looked up from the Pauline Kael book she was reading, saw those eyes, and promptly froze. "Um, sure."

She didn't clear space for him. Didn't move at all, in fact. She only stared. So much so that Robbie swiped a palm across his cheek and said, "Do I have something on my face?"

She laughed. He sat. They started chatting. About midterms. And college life. And life in general. She learned that Robbie had been an undergrad at Olyphant and chose to remain there for his graduate studies, well on his way