

***AND
DON'T
LOOK
BACK***

ALSO BY REBECCA BARROW

BAD THINGS HAPPEN HERE

***AND
DON'T
LOOK
BACK***

REBECCA BARROW

HOT
KEY 
BOOKS

**This work contains some themes of abuse which some readers
may find triggering.**

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
4th Floor, Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square
London WC1B 4DA
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden
bonnierbooks.co.uk/HotKeyBooks

Copyright © Rebecca Barrow, 2023

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Rebecca Barrow to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-1367-4

Also available as an ebook

1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
bonnierbooks.co.uk

P R O L O G U E

She's standing in the silence of the woods, in the milky night with the moon obscured behind dark clouds.

Go back and get your things and leave, now, the voice says, words ricocheting around her, whipping up through the air.

And then she hears something break the silence of the night—something real, not in her head, for as much as she can tell the two apart: the snap of wood, as if beneath a foot.

She whips in the direction of the noise, to the west of the house, somewhere within the trees. “Who’s out there?” she calls, a yell into the absorbing wall of green. “I’m coming after you. I’m not afraid of you!”

There is no mistaking it then, the sound that follows—definite footsteps, disappearing deep into the woods.

She takes one last look back at the house, full dark.

Then she turns in the direction of the noise and takes off at a run, into the depths.

1

“Meredith. Meredith. *Miss Bloom*. Are we boring you, Miss Bloom?”

Harlow stays slumped over her desk, chin propped up on one hand, eyes glazed.

Somewhere beneath the hum of her brain she registers words, noise, but she doesn't actually hear anything. Not until the girl next to her kicks her worn-down Docs against the leg of the desk and Harlow's hand slips from beneath her, jolting her awake. Only then does she become aware of Mr. Thompson at the front of the class, staring at her expectantly.

“Well, Miss Bloom?”

The girl to her left hides behind her hand and mouths something. *Just say no*.

Harlow reaches to tug at hair that is no longer there. She keeps forgetting about the clippers she took to it almost a month ago now, her soft dark curls falling around her, drifting through the bathroom air like dandelion seeds. “No,” she says, like her

accomplice told her to. And then, because she has learned that men like Mr. Thompson, with their power trips and overinflated egos, really only want one thing, she makes her voice small and adds, "Sorry, Mr. Thompson."

The teacher raises one eyebrow, a look Harlow imagines he's practiced in the mirror of his studio apartment a thousand times, modeling it with his carefully rumpled shirts and skinny ties. He probably tells women in bars that he teaches high school English and waits for them to sigh. *Teachers are so amazing. You're, like, so important to those kids.* He probably saves the other part for later, when they're all three pretentious cocktails deep: *I teach, but I'm a writer, too. A poet, really.* He probably takes those women home and pretends not to notice their college IDs in their tiny bags.

Up front now Mr. Thompson still watches her like he's so disappointed. "Try to stay awake in my class, Miss Bloom."

Harlow nods, keeps nodding as he goes back to the board, starts running through whatever chapter they were supposed to read this week. It's been a long time since she forgot her name.

She can't do that. She has to remember that here, in this classroom, in this town, in this particular time, she is Meredith Bloom, new girl, quiet girl, inconspicuous girl. She is not Harlow Ford, whoever that really is.

When class ends, she packs up fast, senses the girl with the beat-up Docs hovering. Really Harlow should say thanks, but she doesn't have the energy. She picked out the kids she would target on her first day here, and this girl wasn't one of them. No: Harlow had seen three girls laughing at something on a phone as they sat on the wall by the parking lot, all wearing short skirts in some

kind of pastel, but with tights that meant they weren't technically breaking dress code, and decided she could be one of them. It's important, she's learned, to ingratiate yourself with somebody. Give yourself a layer of protection. Most people would think the way to stay unnoticed, out of trouble, would be to keep your head down and not talk to anyone. But people notice a loner way more than they notice a girl who quickly becomes just another body in the halls, another clone.

As soon as the bell rings, Harlow is out and weaving through the crowded hallway, heading in the opposite direction of her math class. Her powder-blue Mary Janes pinch as she takes the stairs toward the drama department, and she shouldn't be skipping class, not really, it goes against her rules, but she also can't have another moment like the one she just had. *I need a minute*, she tells herself as she pushes through the heavy door that marks the shift between the new part of the school building and the old, the air instantly cooler as she turns left toward the music rooms. *Get it together, Meredith, Meredith, Meredith.*

Harlow slips inside the last practice room and turns the lock behind her. All the practice rooms lock from the inside, sealing to keep them as soundproof as possible, to mask the noise of a dozen different instruments being played simultaneously. She crouches to unbuckle her shoes and kicks them off, standing in knee-high socks.

That's the kind of girl Meredith Bloom is. She wears kitschy, shiny shoes, pleated skirts, plastic pieces of fruit as earrings. She waits for her friends—Sam and Elle and June—outside the cafeteria at lunch. She laughs at her friends' stories, takes selfies with

them in the mint-green bathrooms, listens to them talk about the boys they want to kiss but don't want to sleep with. She tells them about the boys she wants to kiss, the boyfriend she left behind at her old school in her old town. Meredith Bloom is definitely not a lesbian. Meredith Bloom is not on the run. Meredith Bloom is a nice, normal girl, with a nice, normal family, a mom and a dad who goes on a lot of business trips and an older sister away at college.

Harlow smiles to herself. Nice, normal girl. Nice, normal life. As fucking if.

She sits at the piano, pressing her socked feet on the pedals. She took lessons once, for three months when she was eleven. The lessons had to stop, though, like everything Harlow does stops, comes to an abrupt end when it's time to run again.

Harlow plays fragments of the elementary pieces she learned back then, all that she can remember, and picks out the melodies of songs by sad girl singers who she likes to listen to when she falls asleep. She should be learning about parabolas right now, but this slow, aimless exploration is way more soothing than the drone of yet another teacher's voice.

By the time the period ends and she has put her Mary Janes back on, Harlow is more awake, the dust of a chain of sleepless nights falling off her. When the bell rings, Meredith Bloom heads to the cafeteria to resume her life.

“Mom?”

Harlow closes the door to their latest apartment behind her, listening for movement. Habit.

Her mom appears out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel,

her dark curls hanging loose and heavy with water. “Hi. How was school?”

“Boring. Fine. Whatever.” Harlow drops her bag by the door and crosses into what they call the living room but is really just the half of the apartment where the kitchen isn’t. This isn’t one of the worse places they’ve lived, but it’s far from Harlow’s favorite, with its gray walls and faded rose-print carpet in the bedroom. The landlord didn’t ask for references, though, and accepts the rent in cash, which is all her mom really looks for.

Harlow throws herself onto the couch and closes her eyes. “What’s for dinner?”

“Hold on,” her mom says, her voice fading as Harlow hears her walking. She pictures her mom back in the bathroom, raking leave-in conditioner through her hair, and then moving into the smaller bedroom, picking out her favorite Friday-bar-shift outfit, sitting down at the tiny vanity to paint on smudged black eyeliner and three coats of mascara and scarlet lipstick. Cora Ford doesn’t have to change the way Harlow does, to fit in every new place. She finds a bar, a pub, a grimy club, and shows off how running the bar is nothing to her, how she can pour a perfect measure without looking and handle belligerent drunks without sacrificing her tip, and that’s it. Here in—where are they now? *Oh yeah*, Harlow thinks, *Madigan*—she’s assistant manager at a club that has fading grunge bands almost every night, where her silver jewelry and nose ring make her look like everybody else.

By the time Harlow hears her mom’s footsteps come near, she’s almost asleep. Only almost, though, and she opens her eyes to see her mom looking down at her. “Hi.”

“You look tired,” her mom says.

“I am tired,” Harlow says. “I feel sick.”

“Sick like what?” Her mom perches on the arm of the sofa. “Like you might throw up or like your bones ache?”

“I have a headache,” Harlow says, aware of the whiny tone of her voice. “And my throat hurts.”

Her mom lays a cool hand across Harlow’s forehead, a rare move. “Hmm,” she says. “You don’t feel warm. But maybe we should order pizza just in case. There’s ice cream in the freezer already. Mint chocolate chip,” she says before Harlow can even ask, laughing. “Would that fix you?”

“Maybe,” Harlow says, and sinks deeper into the couch cushions. Pizza and ice cream might be, like, *the* most basic comfort food choices, but it’s what her mom always gets for her when she says she feels sick.

She closes her eyes, and maybe it’s because she’s so tired, exhausted really, or maybe it’s the feel of her mom’s hand on her head, but she lets herself ask a question she wouldn’t usually dare. “What did your mom do for you when you got sick?”

Then her mom’s hand is no longer on her, and Harlow opens her eyes in time to see her mom jump up from the couch and move toward the door. “Actually, I really need to get going,” she says, making a show of checking her phone. “How about I leave you the money and you can order the pizza yourself?”

She grabs her bag and takes her wallet out, digging out enough bills for Harlow to pay and tossing them on the table. “I’ll be back later,” she says without looking at Harlow. “Make sure you lock the door. And save me a slice, okay?”

Then she's gone, the door slamming behind her before Harlow can even process what just happened.

Harlow stays frozen, lying there on the couch, her cheeks burning with the embarrassment of thinking she could ask a question like that and get any kind of answer. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*, she thinks. She should know—no, she *does* know better than that. What did she think, that just because her mom put her hand on her forehead that meant she had suddenly become an entirely different person? That suddenly the parts of her mom that she keeps hidden, the pieces of her that Harlow can't—has never been able to—reach would be right there for her to take?

“Stupid,” she says aloud this time, the word small in the emptiness of the apartment. There has always been this divide. Up on the surface her mom can be good—the kind who takes their kid's temperature and makes sure there's always the specific kind of ice cream they like in the freezer, just in case. But it's what's beneath that haunts Harlow. The way that Harlow doesn't know what it is they're running from, because her mom refuses to tell her, so Harlow long ago stopped asking. The way her mom shies away from Harlow's touch, has never liked to be hugged or hold Harlow's hand and jumps about a thousand feet if she's surprised by a squeeze of her arm or something. How sometimes her mom can be sweet—a hand on the forehead, despite her discomfort—but sometimes she's so far away, retreating to her bedroom, talking to herself in whispers that stop as soon as Harlow enters the room. Retreating as soon as Harlow asks a question she doesn't want to touch.

Like she was ever going to answer.

Harlow sits up and orders the pizza anyway, because even if the moment is gone, she's still starving. She waits for it to arrive, shoving the bills her mom left into the delivery guy's hand, and then leaves the box on the table while she goes to her room. In there she strips out of Meredith Bloom and back to herself, scrubbing off her makeup and putting on black boxers and a black sweatshirt that used to belong to her mom, with some band Harlow doesn't know on the front. She takes a Diet Coke and a Gatorade from the fridge, puts them on the low coffee table next to the food, and pulls the big forest-green blanket off the couch. Then she wraps herself up, sits on the floor, and eats a weed gummy she got in their last town as she puts on her favorite doctors-fucking-and-crying show. When the edible hits and the pizza is still warm and she feels relaxed for the first time since they got here, Harlow thinks she might actually cry.

But she doesn't, only eats enough pizza until her teeth hurt from chewing and bats texts back and forth with Sam-Elle-June and even remembers to put the remains of the pizza on a plate for her mom, in the microwave with a note on the door that says *I'm the best daughter ever, I know* in her messy writing.

Then, mind blurry, Harlow crawls into bed and plummets into deep sleep.