

CARO CLAIRE BURKE

'Everyone is going to be
talking about this book'

BELLA MACKIE

'Wickedly funny,
frighteningly perceptive'

ABIGAIL DEAN



Yesterday

Yesteryear

Caro Claire Burke

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PART ONE

THE PAST

THIS IS THE LAST DAY of the life I imagined for myself.

I woke up two minutes before my alarm went off, like usual. Five fifty-eight and *bing*: eyes wide open, ready to greet the day. I've never had a hard time waking up in the morning. Never used the snooze button, either, not once in my life. Sobriety helps. I don't drink. Discipline helps, too. I was born with spades of discipline, I'm practically overflowing with it—which is why, I think, I've never had that much trouble with anything in my life. Not motherhood, nor marriage, nor building a business, nor serving Him. All of it appeared to me as a series of tasks to be accomplished each day, at the right time, in the correct chronological order. I know it's not that easy for other people, but it really is for me.

That's why all those strangers liked me so much.

That, and the money. The money definitely helped too.

It was wintertime. January. A cold front had just blown through the pass. By my bedroom window, the radiator was puffing hot air. The sky outside was deep-as-death black, and would be for another few hours. Our farm was nestled in the rolling divots between two mountain ranges in Idaho, which meant we didn't see the sun until nine or so in the winter months. We were located five miles down a long, winding gravel country road. Not even airplanes flew overhead.

In the darkness, I listened to the distant mooing of Sassafras, our beloved dairy cow. I could tell by the pitch and register of her moans that my husband, Caleb, was milking her. Right on time. The man was good.

My husband was not disciplined before he met me. He was the youngest of five boys, the runt of the litter in an American dynasty. His father was the latest senator in a long line of U.S. senators, currently barreling through a presidential bid (third time's the charm!); his mother was a homemaker who had spent most of her life drowning in Chardonnay. Together, through a near-fatal combination of paternal neglect and maternal sympathy, they had raised Caleb to be soft and spoiled and sweet. But the only thing more valuable than a person with God-given traits is a person who's willing to learn, and my husband, *that man*, had been willing to learn.

And who was I?

A flawless Christian woman. The manic pixie American dream girl of this nation's deepest, darkest fantasies. The mother every woman wanted to be, and the wife every man wanted to come home to. Like a nun in a porno, it didn't make sense, but also, by God: it worked.

My name is Natalie Heller Mills, and I was perfect at being alive.

In the silences between Sassafras's near-human groans of pleasure (sometimes I joked online that my husband had a bovine mistress, *ha ha!*), I could just hear the distant chicken coop chatter, that meditative *bockbockbockbockbock* that served as the white noise machine of our farm. I loved our chickens. They were as domesticated as dogs, as harmless as toddlers. Sometimes I went out to the coop just to sit with them. I liked to stroke their silky necks, let them peck softly at the feed in my cupped palms.

We'd be killing them soon. In the darkness, my mouth watered. I'd been yearning, lately, for fresh bone broth. Once you've made it from scratch, the store-bought kind tastes rancid.

Through the open crack of my bedroom door, there was a spilling of little-boy laughter. The children were down the hall, having breakfast. I closed my eyes, felt the rhythms of my house like a heartbeat. Nanny Louise—a *godsend for our family*—was at the stove, making pancakes. Producer Shannon—*my right arm*—was by the kitchen sink, getting the video equipment prepared for a long day of work. Stetson and Samuel—*my darling young men*—were sitting at the table, shoving and pulling one another in equally groggy measure. Clementine—*my eldest, the girl who made me a mother*—was at the head of the table, ignoring her brothers, reading a book. Nanny Aimee—*our second in command*—was moving through the far corners of the house, waking up each of the littles, kissing sleepy eyelids, tugging my two toddlers gently forward into the day. She would bring one to the kitchen, hand her over to Nanny Louise, and go back to get the other.

I closed my eyes and whispered my daily thanks to the Lord for everything he had provided me.

Thank you, Father, for Caleb. Thank you for the Inheritance. Thank you for Clementine, Samuel, Stetson, Jessa, Junebug, and the little angel we haven't named yet.

My hand moved instinctively to my stomach, resting at the height of the curve. I was thirty-two years old. Six months pregnant with our sixth child. It had been the easiest pregnancy to date—though all my pregnancies, relatively speaking, had been smooth. I was born to be a mother. I never felt more connected with Him than when I was tasked with carrying one of His creations.