

The Courier

Holly studied PPE at New College, Oxford, and later became a solicitor. She began writing as a hobby at law school, along with hot yoga and marathon running; only the writing has continued. In 2016, Holly undertook a writing course at City University. She is married to James and they have two young children, Cleo and Delilah - Delilah being the exact same age as *The Courier* since she was born the same week as the first word was written! They live in north London.

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Holly Down



First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

This paperback edition published in 2021

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

Paperback ISBN 978 1 529 36295 4
eBook ISBN 978 1 529 36297 8

Typeset in Plantin by Manipal Technologies Limited

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

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

Chapter One

I always wait until I pick up the packages from the depot to choose my playlist. I match the music to my mood, like a boxer making their entrance before a big fight. This morning there were two parcels for Paradise Found, my favourite street. A day for *Power Ballad Classics*.

I save those deliveries till the end of my route, to give me something to look forward to. Delivering parcels isn't the most exciting job in the world but it gives me a chance to get to know new people. A fresh start on every doorstep is how I like to think of it.

Tina Turner is in full flow as I pull up to the gate at Paradise Found. I'm tapping my fingers on the steering wheel, feeling all-powerful from the height of the van's front seat that's like sitting on a throne. It's one of those perfect bright, cold days and I'm belting out the chorus as I pull the handbrake. I wait until the track dies away before switching off the music and entering the key code through the window. The moss-green gate glides open, revealing the row of five imposing houses. I let the van roll inside, taking care not to rev the engine and disturb the peace.

At other deliveries, I aim to execute as quickly as possible: I've got it down to thirty seconds when the recipient is at home, two minutes when they're out. Here, though,

I dawdle. There's something about this street that I've fallen in love with, though I wouldn't like to admit that out loud, and it's not just the obvious wealth. Of course, it's *nice* that the residents take care of their properties – the crocuses in the Bateses' window boxes are already coming through and the Cohens have had their guttering painted over the weekend – but it's more than that. It feels like a home.

I hop down from the van and open the back doors. The wire racks are empty apart from the bottom one where I store the Paradise Found deliveries; there's less chance of something falling and getting damaged down there. There's a department store box for number one and number five's monthly contact lens delivery. I've been getting to know the inner workings of the households in the six months I've been coming here. Deliveries say a lot about you: when your birthday is, roughly when and how much you get paid, what you like to eat and drink, when you get ill and for how long. It's almost like being part of the family.

I walk to the end of the row first, along the stretch of pavement that runs in front of the small patch of front lawn. The houses are identical – white-painted fronts with glossy black railings – but there are subtle differences that provide character. Evelyn at number two is of the generation that appreciates quality. Her curtains are a luxurious heavy brocade, if a little dated for my taste. The Addo-Smyth family at number three are on a constant hand-me-down cycle as the kids outgrow things. There's often a bed frame or a table-tennis table left disassembled outside, awaiting council collection. Number four is the Cohens and there are small signs of Bryce's

style everywhere – the rich purple front door, the gold knocker. His husband Harry is more of an antiques man, but I bet inside is fabulous.

I reach number five and take a moment to compose myself. The Bateses are older than my parents and have lived on the street the longest. They bought the house well before London's property market got silly; it's amazing the details you can find online. They're only recent converts to online shopping, so I like to make sure they have a good experience. I hope they close the door and say to each other *what a nice young lady*, despite me turning forty this year, and tell their friends that they must try home delivery – there's nothing impersonal about it.

I press the doorbell once and wait. They're slow movers – their record is almost five minutes between the ring and the door opening – but I don't like to hustle them. People forget that older people haven't grown up with online shopping and it does require a degree of trust. You are opening your door to a stranger after all. I strain my ears and hear soft footfalls inside before the sound of the door being unlocked. The top deadbolt seems a little stiff, but that could be the fingers turning it, and when the door opens I'm surprised to see Mrs Bates's face in the crack; it's usually her husband at this time of day. She leaves the chain on.

'Delivery, Mrs Bates,' I say brightly and loudly. 'I'm going to need a signature.'

'Of course. Is that you Laurel?'

'That's me.' I feel a fizz of pleasure that she's remembered. It's shocking how many people can open and close

their door without actually seeing me, without recognising that another person is there.

I hear the rattle of her undoing the chain and keep smiling while I wait. The door opens another couple of inches. In the tiny gap I can see that the hallway is decorated in an ornate wallpaper with a dark green shag-pile carpet under foot – nothing I haven't seen before. Mrs Bates is wearing her lambswool slippers. I shift position, moving from foot to foot in a way I hope isn't obvious, but the angle isn't wide enough to see beyond the wall.

'Here's your parcel.' I hand her the narrow box of prescription lenses. 'All I need now is your signature.'

She takes the plastic stylus – her knuckles are swollen and red and I wonder if it's arthritis – and reproduces her signature in copperplate lettering on the screen. Young people barely bother with a squiggle, usually without looking up from their phone. Once the transaction is over and the door begins to close, I feel a sudden desperation to prolong it. The day has been a brisk one and there haven't been many opportunities to chat.

'Lovely flowers,' I say. 'Nice to see a bit of colour already.'

The door wavers. A slight frown crosses her face but it softens when she sees my look of admiration. 'Thank you. It has been a mild winter hasn't it?'

She doesn't wait for me to reply and there's a click as the door shuts and then the rattle of the chain and the turning of locks. The Bateses are probably not planning on venturing out again this evening and I don't blame them; it's starting to get cold. I stare at the purple buds emerging from the planter for another few seconds,

wondering if they'll survive the February chill, before striding back along the row to number one.

I don't like to play favourites, but Patrick Williams is the resident who intrigues me the most. Ten years ago his novel was a smash hit. Back when I got the tube to and from work every day, I remember every other person devouring the words between its distinctive yellow cover. I've read the rave reviews. The film was a flop but he must have made a pretty penny: a year later he spent £1.8 million on this house, another titbit I found online. Not a sniff of a sequel as far as I can see and he's always home; even the Bateses miss a delivery more often than he does. I wonder what he does to keep busy in there, living alone.

His is the shabbiest house. There are little signs of neglect, like the three strands of cobweb in the top-left corner of the front window and the tub of Halloween sweets that has been on the inside sill since October. None of the others would allow that to linger. Patrick always answers quickly. He must have his writing desk on the ground floor. Perhaps he's typing his next novel as I stand outside. Maybe I'll feature. I smile at this thought as I press the bell though there's nothing worth writing about me – nothing good anyway.

I don't need to look at my watch to know Patrick is taking longer than usual. I hesitate, unsure whether to ring again or keep waiting. I push the bell. I wait a while. I know it's silly but I'm worried. He's only mid-forties so there's unlikely to be anything wrong with him, but this is out of character. Company policy is not to interfere but I like to keep an eye on my regulars so I take out my

phone, wondering who I can call. It's only after another couple of minutes that I think to check whether he's listed a safe space. I tap through the details and find he has: *Take side path. Leave inside green bin.*

I feel a frisson of excitement at the change in routine. I've never seen anything other than the front of the row before as the others have always selected '*leave with a neighbour*' as their delivery instruction when they've been out. As the end-of-terrace, Patrick's house has a narrow path alongside it, barred by a wrought-iron gate that I've always assumed was locked, but the latch opens easily. Why haven't I tried it before when I must have been here close to a hundred times? *Because that would be prying*, I tell myself.

Patrick's bins are stored against the wall and at the end is another gate. I run my fingertips along the smooth painted wall as I walk to the end. My hands are getting stiff with cold so I push them deep into my pockets. The second gate is locked with a padlock but through the bars I see an overgrown lawn, a rusty barbecue, and the other side of the fence that backs onto the footpath I'm familiar with. The garden is entirely ordinary and this side of the house doesn't even have windows. I'm disappointed but I tell myself not to be silly. Paradise Found is just another street, after all. And really, it's none of my business.

I return to the bins and unclip the lid of the green one. It's empty. I place the package inside and complete the details on my phone so that Patrick receives the instant delivery notification. Once I'm done, I feel deflated. The chill in the air makes me shiver in my thin

company-branded fleece and I hug myself, trying to rub some warmth back into my skin.

I know I should leave but my eyes fall on the second bin, and I feel my brain start whirring. It's gone four. Soon it will be dark but the light hasn't disappeared yet and the passage isn't overlooked. I could take a quick peek. It's amazing the things people throw out these days. It can tell you a lot about them and I would like to get to know Patrick a little better. I do see a lot of him.

I look around me to check I'm alone before lifting the lid and pulling out the first black bag. This isn't something I make a habit of but I tell myself it's only rubbish; things that have been discarded, like I have been. I promise myself I'll only do it this once as I make quick work of the knot. The sulphurous smell of rotten egg makes me gag. On top are several broken shells and a gooey mass of what might have been cake mix. I didn't have Patrick down as a baker but it just goes to show, you should never judge a book by its cover. I go to close the bag up again but then I spot a sheaf of papers further down, and my pulse quickens. It could be a manuscript. Perhaps I'll uncover Patrick's second bestseller that he's cast aside too hastily. I picture him thanking me profusely for rescuing it, telling me he'll dedicate it to me – and then catch myself and shake my head at my own silliness.

I scrape the goo to one side and extract the top piece of paper. It's a letter from a solicitor with a fancy header and a date at the top from 2016. Patrick must have been having a clear-out. I scan the text but it's just a standard fee quote setting out the hourly rates and disbursement charges. I have several of these in my own files only from

a different type of lawyer. This must be from his divorce. His book was dedicated to ‘*My darling Maria*’ and there’s no darling Maria living at number one, Paradise Found.

I drop the letter back in and flick through the next few sheets. It’s all correspondence – invoices from plumbers and letters from estate agents asking if he wants to sell – nothing of interest. I delve deeper. Beneath the paper, a bathroom bin has clearly been emptied. There’s a squashed bottle of Listerine, a couple of cardboard loo rolls as well as – my fingers fumble – a slippery used condom and—

‘What the hell are you doing?’

I stand up so fast my neck cricks. My face is on fire and that sickeningly familiar feeling of shame I hate so much is spreading across my chest. Patrick is inside the gate with a pile of shopping bags at his feet. His face is twisted in anger and his rimless glasses are steamed up from the exertion. I know I need to act quickly, and my mind races in search of an explanation. What can I say? It’s risky but all I can think of is to lift my hand and tug the silver moon-shaped earring from its hole.

‘I’m sorry. I lost my earring.’ I rub the empty hole with the earring pressed into my palm, praying he won’t spot it. ‘I was leaving your parcel in the safe space and I just popped a crisp packet in your bin when I realised it was missing.’

His expression is a mix of incredulity and disgust. I force myself to hold his gaze and try to convey that this isn’t me, it’s not who I really am. I edge back from the gaping bin bag to distance myself further from my own actions. Patrick is a handsome man – my ‘type’, as they say – the perfect combination of scatter-brained academic and

square-jawed aftershave model and I've allowed myself to daydream about him on more than one occasion. Needless to say, my daydreams don't contain moments like this.

He still hasn't spoken so I go on, my words coming out in a rush. 'I thought I felt it come out when I bent down and it has sentimental value. It was a gift from my husband, my ex – well, he died so . . .' It's always hard to find the right words.

Patrick pushes his hand through his thick, salt-and-pepper hair and pushes his glasses up his nose. The intensity of his stare makes me shift uncomfortably and there's a moment where I see I'm in the balance – my job, *everything*, is in his hands – then his expression lifts and I feel a swoop of relief. 'I'm sorry, gosh. Can I help you look?'

I dump the bag back into the bin and let my earring fall inside. 'Don't worry. Maybe it came out in the van.'

It's cold enough now to see our breath, and it's time to go home. My body feels wrung out from the tension. I open the recycling bin and lift out Patrick's package, trying to hide the tremors in my hands. 'I can bring this to the door if you need a hand?'

He picks up his shopping bags and tries to figure out a way to carry the box too before nodding and saying stiffly, 'That would be helpful.'

For ten seconds it feels like we could be an ordinary couple, returning home from a trip to the supermarket. Perhaps we've bought steaks and a bottle of red, maybe a cheesecake for dessert – my favourite, but they're always too big for one. The silly fantasy warms me and the panicky feeling fades. I watch as Patrick unlocks the deadbolt first, then the Yale. There's no alarm. He steps into the

dark hallway and deposits the plastic bags inside before returning for the package but I don't leave right away. I need to make him understand.

'I'm sorry about before. I would never have done that if it hadn't been so important to me.' My hand returns to my lobe and I rub some heat into the bare skin.

'I understand,' Patrick says, and he meets my gaze. 'I really do.'

As his eyes bore into mine it's as though he's trying to communicate something to me, and we share a moment that makes me think that Patrick knows loss intimately, in the same way I do. But then the moment is over; he doesn't invite me in or even turn on the light. I've only seen a glimpse of the hallway and now his back garden. It's the kitchen I'd like to see, and the bedroom: the heart and soul of the home respectively. But I know they will have to remain the stuff of my daydreams.

'Thank you,' he says.

I give him a bright, fake smile, walk back to the van and haul myself into the driver's seat but I don't turn on the music. I look down at my hands and realise that I'm still shaking. What was I thinking? That was too close. What must he think of me? I glance back and see that Patrick's lights are still off. Perhaps he's behind the curtain, one finger hooked around the edge to make an eye-sized gap, watching me.

Chapter Two

The spell cast by Paradise Found is soon broken when I join back-to-back traffic just beyond the gate. My visit is the one moment of calm and light in my day, but the feeling never lasts long. Rush hour in London starts early and finishes late, and ‘hour’ doesn’t quite cut it. Tension quickly returns to my shoulders. A moped cuts in front of me and I jam the horn. I’m in no rush but you learn not to show weakness on the roads or you become a victim. That’s a lesson I learned the hard way.

It’s less than a mile as the crow flies to the low-rise estate in Whitechapel where I live, but it takes forty minutes in the traffic. Patience is something I’ve learned in the five years since I became a delivery driver, that and being able to sit alone with my thoughts. My old job in banking didn’t allow for much self-reflection, but nowadays I have too much time for it.

By the time I reach my parking space in the alleyway behind the estate, I’ve already been over the incident with Patrick several times in my head, my thoughts buzzing with the implications and insinuations. It wasn’t so bad, I tell myself. He seemed to accept my story and maybe it will give us something to bond over and laugh about next time. *I can’t believe you thought I was snooping in your bins – how funny!* I test it out a few times

aloud, adding a false laugh at the end that I work on so it sounds authentic.

I park up and as I walk to the entrance my feet crunch on broken glass, sending empty laughing gas canisters skittering. This area is an odd mix of young people looking to party and families. I'm here because it's cheap since all the money I earned is long gone. Legal representation is expensive. Another lesson I learned the hard way.

My flat is on the fourth floor and the estate is teeming with life as I make my way up. There are people shouting, a baby crying, and someone is playing hip-hop too loudly. I step over kids tapping on phones on the stairs and breathe in the aromatic smell of dinner that wafts through the building at this time of day. I like being so close to everyday family rituals. It's easy to feel like I'm part of them and I can fool myself into thinking I'm not so alone.

When I moved in five years ago, the noise took some time to get used to. Our old flat was on the top floor of a new glass building that felt as if it had been hermetically sealed. None of the windows opened and I can remember the stillness of the air and the sound of footsteps echoing on the hardwood floors. Sometimes it felt hard to breathe in there.

This block is an ugly seventies building made from dirty grey bricks with small rooms and tiny windows, and it's bursting at the seams. It's not much to look at but each floor has a walkway that runs the length of the building with quite a view over the city. There's an unbroken sight line to the dome of St Paul's but I don't

like to look out for long – the city holds too many bad memories for me.

The walkway is used as an extension to people's living spaces and is always cluttered with drying racks, stacks of bikes and weedy potted tomato plants. Next door, Ramzan is out on his deckchair, wearing a shiny red puffer jacket and smoking a cigarette. His hair is parted in sleek curtains that he has a habit of smoothing onto his high forehead and his nose pokes through the middle like a blade. He gestures to the pack of Embassy on the armrest with a flick of his skinny wrist.

'Thanks,' I say and he tosses me the packet.

I light a cigarette and breathe deeply. I don't often smoke but after what just happened, I feel like I need one. It takes a minute for the nicotine to circulate but soon I feel it tingling in my fingers and toes.

'Rough day?' he asks.

I shrug. Ramzan drives an Uber so he gets it.

'You?'

He cocks one eyebrow and I can tell that he's got a story. One of us usually does given that working in our jobs you see the worst of humanity. He takes a long drag of his cigarette before launching into it. 'I had this one lady right, picked her up on Oxford Street and drove her all the way to Holland Park. She only went and left her shopping in the back and then she calls me wanting me to drop it round right away only I'm already on a job to Gatwick.'

I nod along but Ramzan needs little encouragement. We act as a form of therapy for one another, taking a minute out on the walkway to vent before entering our own flats and dealing with our own shit. I consider him a

friend, perhaps my only one, but I'd never tell him that. 'So I must be, what, an hour away, and she says—'

He's interrupted by a squeal and a thump from inside his flat followed by a loud wail. Ramzan is only twenty-four but he's married with two kids already. He opens the door and yells something in Bengali. The noise stops. He takes out another cigarette and lights it from the tail end of the first, smoking faster as though aware our time is coming to an end.

'Where was I? Gatwick, right. So I cancel the job and get back to her house an hour later with her shopping and guess what?'

'What?'

'She's only gone out. I ring her and she says to come back tomorrow. I'm tempted to get her stuff up on eBay.'

We both laugh but I know he'll be driving across London again tomorrow. He can't risk his rating. We smoke in silence for a minute. I lean with my back against the railing, elbows on the metal guard rail, and think of Patrick.

'What?' Ramzan says.

I realise I'm frowning as I go over again in my head what happened with Patrick. Ramzan might not understand so I just give my head a little shake and force a smile.

'I actually had a nice one today,' I say.

'Why am I not surprised. You always get the good ones. A guy was it?'

I nod.

'Bet he wanted a piece of the Laurel pie.'

I give a strangled-sounding laugh, not wanting to let on how much I wish this was true, which Ramzan interprets

as me agreeing. He whoops and flicks his hand so the fingers clack together.

‘I knew it. Come on, don’t leave me hanging. What was he like?’

‘Just a guy,’ I say quickly.

‘Age?’

‘Forties.’

‘Peng?’

‘What?’

‘Come on, man. Nice-looking? You know, fit.’

I think of Patrick’s scruffy charm and try to see him through Ramzan’s eyes. Today he was wearing chinos and a blazer with orange patches on the elbows and he looked like he hadn’t brushed his hair in days. A far cry from Ramzan’s carefully cultivated look of designer labels and lots of hair gel. ‘He has a certain appeal,’ I settle on.

Ramzan’s face twitches as if he’s unimpressed.

‘What about his crib?’

I hesitate. ‘It’s big.’

Ramzan flicks his hand again, twice this time. ‘That’s what I like to hear. You want to focus, girl. He could be your ticket out of here. Get yourself installed in some mansion and Uncle Ramzan can come for afternoon tea. Hey, I’ll be your driver. You pay well?’

‘Of course.’ We’re both laughing as Ramzan drinks from an imaginary teacup, his pinkie finger sticking up into the air. I don’t tell him that I’ve already been on the other side and lived that life. My last bonus from the bank was probably more than he gets paid in three years.

There's a loud crash from inside Ramzan's flat and he jumps up.

'That better not have been the telly.'

He opens the door and shouts again but his wife calls back in strained tones. It sounds like he's needed.

'Bloody kids. Don't have any.' He says this with a smile and we both know he's joking. His kids are his world. I laugh along and try to suppress the flicker of jealousy. A normal family life isn't an option for me.

'I better go,' He says and grinds his cigarette on the bricks beneath his kitchen window. He goes inside, telling off his children to a chorus of noisy tears that I hear as if I'm in the room with them. The insulation here is dreadful, but I'll happily take the noise if it means I can enjoy our chats. It's rare that I have any other conversations that go beyond '*delivery for you*' these days.

I savour my cigarette before unlocking my front door. Inside smells of damp and the noise of the tantrum from next door is barely muffled. There's nothing inviting or homely about the place but I haven't made much effort. I've moved four times in the past five years and never really put down roots. What's the point when it's just me?

It's not much warmer inside than out and I switch on the bare bulb overhead, going straight through into the main living space – a single room with kitchen units on one side that look out onto the walkway. My only furniture is a desk that used to be my dad's before he retired, a crappy sofa that I got from Gumtree that looks worse in reality than it did in the photos, and an ergonomic desk chair – a large leather monstrosity that has a rest for every part of my body, some days I sleep in it.

My notebooks take up a lot of the rest of the space. They're piled on the desk and there are stacks behind the sofa that have grown to almost waist-height. Older ones are filed in the boxes in the bedroom and it's clear from the pungent smell of damp in that room that some have got wet, only I can never find the right box and I've grown used to it now.

It may look like a mess but I have a system. It started as a way to fill my evenings after I'd finished my deliveries. I'd record little details about my day – nice things people had said or funny things I'd seen – but I know it's got a little out of hand. I keep finding streets where I want to keep a record of everything I learn. Places like Paradise Found with the perfect combination of luxury and comfort; the polar opposite of here. It's just a hobby, I reason, whenever I start to feel like it's going too far. There's no harm in looking, as they say.

The wall above the desk is dedicated to Sophie. There are my favourite photos from when she was a baby blown up to A4 size. A newborn Sophie, pink and wrinkled like a baby mouse. Her first day of nursery, with her hair in two plaits, hugging her llama blanket to her cheek – she never let it out of her sight. The last picture I have of her is in the centre of the wall. She's just turned two; her baby fat is already disappearing and her brown eyes are serious like mine – it's the straight eyebrows that do it.

My notes are on Post-its scattered around the photos of her. Different colours for different theories. Some days I add to them, my adrenaline pumping as I have a new idea, and other days I tear them down in disgust. Today, I don't have the energy; it hurts to even think of

her, so I don't. I've become an expert at controlling my thoughts since otherwise I wouldn't be able to get out of bed.

I open the kitchen cupboard and take out the bottle of Johnnie Walker and a glass. I pour it with shaking hands and slam a couple of inches back. It's tempting to keep going at that pace but I've promised myself I'll slow down. Much like the notebooks, my drinking started as a small escape, but it's even harder to keep it under control when it's one of the few pleasures I have left.

I pour a second, my hands steady this time, and take it over to the desk where my Paradise Found notebooks are displayed in pride of place. It's only been six months but the blue covers are already getting tatty. I slide out 'number one' and open it to the next blank page. I write: *Yale + deadbolt + no alarm*. Next, I draw a diagram of the side passage and mark the location of the bins. Not that I can check them again for a while; I've already drawn too much attention to myself. *And not that I would want to*, I remind myself. Today was just a one-off.

The whisky begins to soften the edges of my thoughts and I rest my head back. It was a close call today, but I realise I don't regret it. Since I began visiting I've felt a certain sort of kinship with Patrick. We both live alone, both pursue solitary careers, and we were both married once. Perhaps we're both lonely? I haven't really dared believe it before but despite what happened, it felt like a breakthrough. At the very least, I've made an impression now where before he probably never even noticed my existence. That's something.

My eyes grow heavy and I let them close. Next time I'll ask him a question. Something beyond '*How are you today?*' An opener. I never was brilliant with men but I wasn't a total disaster. I managed to marry Dominic, after all. It wasn't all plain sailing but there were some good years, back when my life was on track. Perhaps Ramzan may be right, I think as I drift off to sleep: Patrick could be my way back. But of course, it could never be the same, not without Sophie.

In the best books, the ending often comes as a shock.
Not just because of that one last twist in the tale,
but because you have been so absorbed in their world,
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