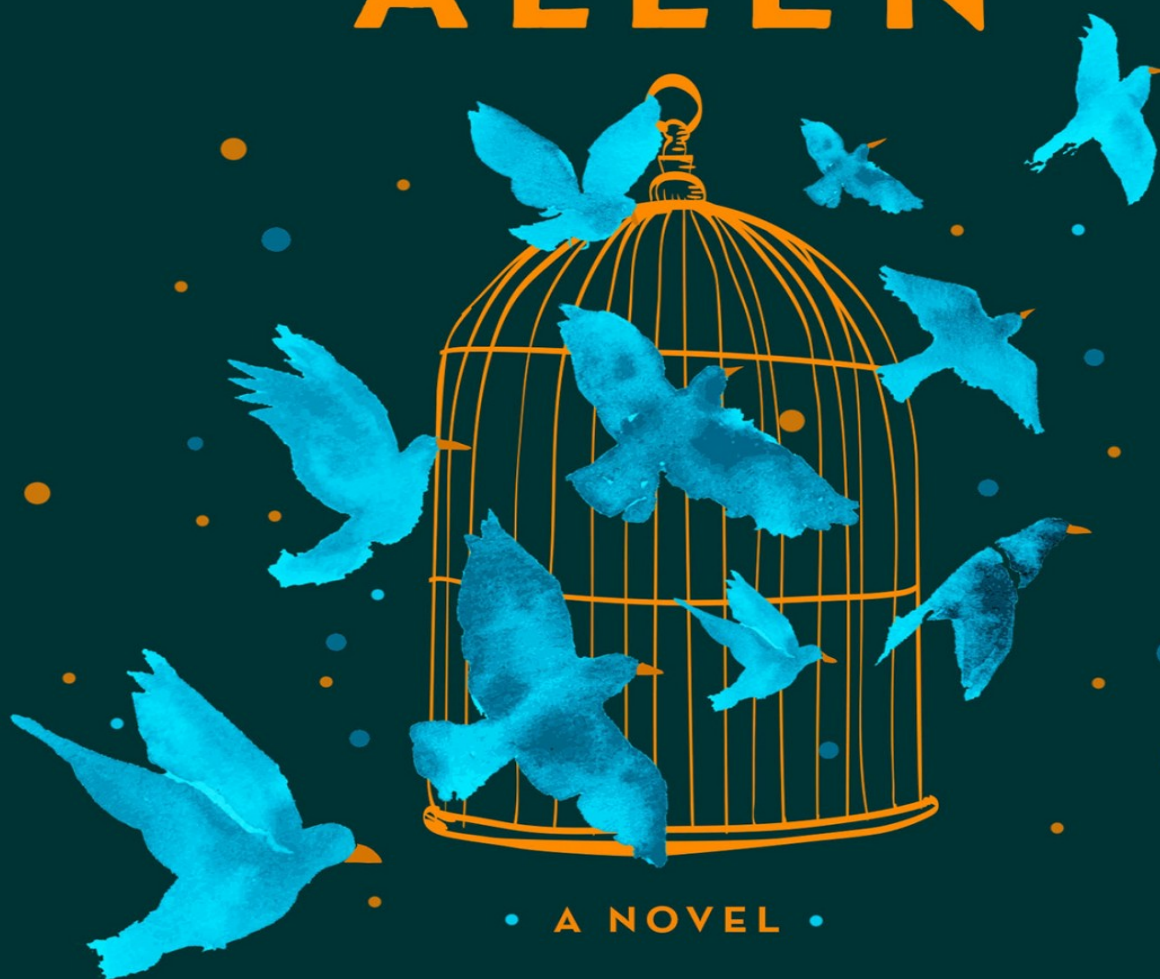


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARAH
ADDISON
ALLEN



• A NOVEL •

OTHER
BIRDS

Other
Birds



Sarah Addison Allen



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*To the memory of my mom, who taught me that food is love. It was the first,
and best, magic I ever knew.*

*And to the memory of my sister, who came before me and illuminated the
way.*

Stories aren't fiction. Stories are fabric. They're the white sheets we drape over our ghosts so we can see them.

—ROSCOE AVANGER, *Sweet Mallow*

Chapter One

The empty wicker birdcage beside her began to rattle impatiently. Zoey gave it a sharp look as if to say they were almost there. It stopped.

She glanced at the cabdriver to see if he had noticed. The old fig-shaped man was watching her in the rearview mirror, his silver eyebrows raised. Several seconds passed and he continued to stare, which she found disconcerting because she felt his eyes should really be on the long bridge over the water. But he seemed to be waiting for her to respond.

“Did you say something?” Zoey said. He hadn’t spoken a word since his *Where to?* when he’d picked her up at the airport.

“I asked if this was your first trip to Mallow Island.”

“Oh,” she said. “Yes.” The birdcage rattled in disagreement, but she ignored it this time. It was her first trip. The first trip she could remember, anyway.

“Sightseeing?”

“I’m moving there. I start college in Charleston this fall.”

“Well,” he said, drawing the word out like a tune. “Don’t hear of too many people moving to Mallow Island. It’s mostly a tourist place because of that book by Roscoe Avanger. You know it?”

Zoey nodded, distracted now because the small sea island had just appeared on the horizon and she didn’t want to miss a moment of it. It was rising from the marshy coastal water like a lackadaisical sea creature sunning itself, not a care in the world.

The closer they got to it, the more her excitement grew. This was really happening.

As soon as they were off the bridge, the cabdriver took a left and traveled down a two-lane highway that skirted the perimeter of the island. The water, dense with reedy vegetation, ended just inches from the pavement. But it didn’t

seem to bother the drivers of cars with out-of-state license plates. They zipped along confidently, following decorative metal signs that read:

THE MALLOW ISLAND RESORT HOTEL: 3 MILES AHEAD

THE SUGAR WAREHOUSE: 2 MILES AHEAD

HISTORIC TRADE STREET: NEXT RIGHT

Afraid he might miss the turn, Zoey was about to point it out to the cabdriver, but he'd already put on his blinker. She sat forward, not knowing where to look first. If she hadn't known that Mallow Island had been famous for its marshmallow candy over a century ago, Trade Street would have told her right away. It was busy and mildly surreal. The sidewalks were crowded with tourists taking pictures of old, narrow buildings painted in faded pastel colors. Nearly every restaurant and bakery had a chalkboard sign with a marshmallow item on its menu—marshmallow popcorn, chocolate milk served in toasted marshmallow cups, sweet potato fries with marshmallow dipping sauce.

Zoey rolled down the window, and a thick combination of salt from the Atlantic and sugar from the bakeries blew in. It was both strange and familiar. She wondered if the smell was bringing up a long-forgotten memory from when she was a little girl. She struggled to recall anything but, as with most things concerning her mother, her memory was more wish than real.

“Are you sure the place you're looking for is on Trade Street?” the cabdriver asked, braking hard when a dazzled tourist decided to cross the street without looking. Zoey had to put her arm out to stop the birdcage beside her from toppling over. Pigeon was going to be seriously pissed when Zoey finally let her out. “This is a business section, not residential.”

Nervous that she might have gotten some detail wrong, Zoey rooted through her backpack to find the piece of paper on which she'd written the information. “Yes,” she said, reading from the paper. “It's called the Dellawisp Condos. The building manager said the turn wasn't marked, but to go down the alley beside Sugar and Scribble Bakery and you'll find it.” That was the hope, anyway. If this didn't work out, there was no backup plan. She'd be stuck here with no place to live this summer.

The cabdriver shrugged as they crawled down the street with bumper-to-bumper traffic. He found the bakery—a pink confection of a building with peeling white trim that looked like icing—and turned. The alley was darkly shaded by the buildings on either side of it, which didn't bode well for finding

anyplace livable back here. Just when Zoey was beginning to think that this was a colossal joke being played on her, and that her father and stepmother were having a good laugh about it right now, the alley opened up and there it was—a beautiful old cobblestone building shaped like a horseshoe. A wrought iron gate was the only entrance. It gave the place an air of magical secrecy, probably bewildering anyone who happened to take a wrong turn down this dead-end alley.

It was smaller than Zoey thought it would be. Every story she'd ever heard her father tell of her mother had been prefaced by her love of money and her conniving ways of getting it, so this wasn't a place Zoey would ever have thought her mother would want to be—tiny and quiet and hidden. She felt a small thrill of happiness. Already she was learning something new.

“Huh. Who would've thought this was back here?” the cabdriver said. “How did you find out about this place?”

“My mother used to live here,” Zoey answered, handing him some cash. Then she grabbed her backpack and the wicker birdcage and got out.

She purposely kept her back to the cab as it left. As soon as she could no longer hear it, she looked over her shoulder to make sure it was gone, then opened the birdcage. She felt Pigeon dart by her on angry wings.

Zoey took a steadying breath and walked to the gate, which bore a weathered brass sign that read THE DELLAWISP. She pushed it open and the hinges squeaked, piercing the silence. In front of her was a small, overgrown center garden. She stepped inside and followed a brick pathway lined with short trees bearing clusters of disproportionately large, bell-shaped blooms. They gave off a cloying scent like a bottle of dropped perfume. Her backpack brushed one of the trees as she passed, and suddenly a swirl of tiny turquoise birds flew out.

With a shriek of surprise, Zoey ran the rest of the way to the U-bend of the building. She stepped onto the sidewalk in front of a door marked MANAGER. The birds, disconcertingly, landed on the sidewalk and began to hop around her.

They were exquisite little things, some no bigger than ring boxes. She watched as one found her shoelace and began to pull on it with its sherbet-orange beak.

“Please don't do that,” she said, not wanting to move for fear of hurting it. “Can't you tell it to stop?” she asked Pigeon.

Pigeon gave a crisp coo from the garden, as if to say this move hadn't been Pigeon's idea, so Zoey was on her own.

Zoey knocked on the manager's door, her eyes still on the birds. When the door opened, she looked up to see an elderly black man in faded jeans and a khaki work shirt. He had a long white beard tied at his chin with a rubber band, like a pirate. The little birds seemed to take the open door as an invitation to enter and hopped past him into the office.

The man just stood there. His rheumy brown eyes, magnified behind square glasses, were focused on something over Zoey's shoulder in the garden. Zoey had to resist the urge to wave her hand in front of his face to find out if he could actually see her.

"Hi," Zoey finally said. "Are you Frasier?"

His eyes snapped to hers and he gave a rusty laugh. "I'm sorry, yes. And you must be Zoey. Welcome."

"Thank you." She pointed past him into his office. "Um, should they be doing that?"

He turned to see that the birds were on his desk, scattering papers and pencils. "Hey, come on now. Get off of there," he said, shooing them away as he opened a drawer and produced a set of keys. Zoey stepped aside as he herded the birds out and closed the door behind him. "They're a little spoiled, and bad for stealing. If you lose something, let me know. I keep a box of things I find in their nests."

"What kind of birds are they?" Zoey asked while the birds chattered complaints back and forth to each other as they hopped back into the garden.

"They're called dellawisps. They're native to the island. The man who renovated this building years ago found them nesting here, and he named the place after them. Not his most creative moment. But fitting, I suppose." He held up the keys. "Ready to see your place?"

Zoey nodded, wondering which of the landing units was hers. There appeared to be only five condos—two landing units each on either side of the U-bend, and one second-story unit perched above Frasier's office in the bend itself. A twisting metal staircase led to its balcony like a long curl of hair.

She was surprised when Frasier went to the staircase and began to walk up. She hurried after him, her backpack in one hand and the birdcage in the other. "This place isn't what I was expecting," she said as she followed him around the spiraling stairs.

Frasier stopped on the balcony and waited for her to join him. "The best things never are. I wish I could go back and see it for the first time." He watched her with his magnified eyes as she reached the balcony and took in the view. "This was the only structure to survive after all the houses on the island burned

during the Civil War. The shops on Trade Street were later built in front of it, so it just sat here for years, forgotten by everyone but the birds. It was once horse stables. You can see where the stall doors were down there, where the patio doors are now. Your studio here was the hayloft.”

Zoey turned to him with surprise. Her mother had lived in a *hayloft*? In her wildest dreams she wouldn't have come up with that.

At that moment, one of the glass-paned patio doors flew open and a woman in her forties with dark, greasy hair stepped out. She looked like she'd secretly raided someone's dirty-laundry basket. She was wearing a skirt over a pair of pants and what appeared to be three different shirts, badly buttoned, one over another. She stared up at Zoey with protuberant green eyes that made her seem slightly mad.

“What are you doing?” she yelled. “Who are you?”

“This is Zoey Hennessey,” Frasier called. Zoey gave her a small wave. “I told you about her this morning. She's our newest resident.”

“I don't like it! I don't like it one bit!” She pointed at Zoey. “No noise! Do you hear me? I'm trying to find the story I lost. It's in here somewhere and I can't concentrate with all this activity!” She turned and walked back inside.

“That was Lizbeth Lime,” Frasier said before Zoey could ask. “You'll get used to her. We all have. The rest are a quiet bunch. Next to her is Charlotte Lungren. She's an artist. On the opposite side of the garden is Mac Garrett. He works nights. And next to him is Lucy Lime, Lizbeth's sister.” At Zoey's obvious alarm that there might be another version of Lizbeth living here, Frasier smiled and said, “Don't worry. Lucy never complains about anything. She never leaves her condo.”

“Never?”

Frasier shook his head. “She doesn't like being around people.”

“Not even her sister?”

“Especially not her sister. She even has her groceries and prescriptions delivered.” He turned to unlock the balcony doors. “Speaking of deliveries, your boxes from Tulsa arrived yesterday. I had them put inside for you.”

Frasier stepped in and reached for a wall switch. A crystal light fixture popped on, raining down variegated light. The building revealed itself to be like a geode—rocky on the outside but sparkling with unexpected decadence inside.

It was small, just one room. The furniture was covered with white sheets, but everything else she could see was lovely—the golden parquet floor, the

whitewashed rafters, and the long kitchen counter on the far wall, which sported kitschy, pale pink appliances.

“I thought about uncovering all this for you, but I figured it was something you would want to do yourself.” He handed her the keys. “If you have any questions, let me know. I’m here until five every day.”

Pigeon flew in, bringing with her a wave of perfume from the strange blossoms on the trees. Questions. Yes, Zoey had questions. Tons of them. But the only one she could think to ask was “What are those trees in the garden?”

“Brugmansia. Some folks call them angel’s trumpet. The man who renovated the place planted several different bushes and trees to see which kind the birds liked. He said it was the least he could do, since he had to evict them from their nests in the horse stalls. They liked the brugmansia best.”

Pigeon circled the room restlessly. She moved the fragrance around like a ceiling fan. “The blooms have a very strong scent.”

“Could’ve been worse.” Frasier shrugged as he left. “They could have liked stinkweed.”

A smile slowly formed on Zoey’s lips as Pigeon swooped overhead. This was it. She dropped her backpack and the birdcage and immediately began pulling the sheets off the furniture in great sweeps. On one side of the room there was an over-the-top white leather sofa, a glass-topped coffee table, and two armchairs. On the other side were a white bed, a night table, and a tall chest of drawers.

Giddy with the possibility of all she might discover, Zoey started going through the drawers and cabinets.

But they were all empty.

The closet, too, was bare save for a set of pink sheets and bath towels.

Panic setting in, she took a second turn around the room to make sure, but there was absolutely nothing personal here of her mother’s. Nothing. Not even under the mattress or between the couch cushions. There were no photos, no books with dog-eared pages, no half-written letters, no old address books, no clothes left in the closet. There was only this dust-covered furniture, new and impersonal, as if her mother had had the place redecorated just before she’d died twelve years ago.

Zoey sat on the stiff leather sofa and looked around, stunned.

To her right were the boxes Zoey had mailed a few days ago. They contained books and clothes, the only things she wanted to bring with her from her old life. She’d been told her mother’s condo was furnished, so she’d left all her bedroom furniture behind in Tulsa. Earlier that morning when Zoey’s Uber had arrived to

take her to the airport, there had already been a charity truck idling in the driveway to haul it all away. Her stepmother, Tina, had timed it down to the minute.

Zoey hadn't been surprised. Tina had been talking about turning Zoey's bedroom into a craft room for months. She even had a name for it. Wonderland.

I can't wait to get started on Wonderland.

That room is perfect for Wonderland.

Zoey, start packing so I can get to work on Wonderland as soon as you leave.

Zoey finally reached for her backpack and emptied its contents onto the coffee table in front of her. These were things she didn't want to risk mailing—her laptop, her tablet, her phone, important papers, and the small wooden box in which she kept the precious few items she had of her mother's.

She opened the box and took out the only photo. In it, Paloma was wearing red shoes and had a dark, high ponytail that rested like a question mark against the back of her head. With her short bangs and arched eyebrows, all she would have needed was a scarf around her neck and a bicycle with a basket and she would have looked like something from an old movie. Zoey didn't know when the photo had been taken. Zoey's father had only given it a cursory glance and told her he didn't remember when Zoey had asked years ago. But Zoey figured it couldn't have been long after Paloma had immigrated from Cuba. Zoey knew the story by heart. She used to recite it to herself over and over when she was a child, sometimes reenacting it in her bedroom. Paloma and her brother had been raised by their grandfather, who had been a birdkeeper. When he died, Paloma and her brother decided to leave Cuba on a small boat. There was a horrible storm, and her brother died. Paloma then drifted on the upturned boat for three days before a fishing boat found her. She looked so young in the photo, far too young to have been on her own, far too young to have taken up with Zoey's much older father once she arrived in America. Paloma had only lived here in South Carolina four years before Zoey's father retired and they all moved to Tulsa, where his family was from. But Paloma came back frequently to visit, sometimes for weeks at a time with baby Zoey, to this same condo Zoey's father bought Paloma as an extravagant gift early in their relationship.

Zoey got up and went to the pink refrigerator. She tacked the photo there with a promotional magnet bearing the name of a local appliance store. She hadn't eaten all day—she'd been too excited—so she automatically reached for the silver refrigerator handle and pulled it. She stared at the empty interior, realizing she needed to buy groceries and she had no idea where to get them.

She closed the door and leaned her forehead against it, suddenly feeling very alone.

But she could do this.

She *would*.

★ ★ ★

It was now after midnight, but Zoey hadn't moved from her sitting position on the balcony floor with her back against the stone wall. The humid air almost had a texture to it, and was unusually still.

God is holding His breath.

Her mother used to whisper that to Zoey in her mysterious accent when the wind abruptly stopped and everything went quiet for a moment, almost as if she'd made it happen. Zoey had a vague sense that her mother had been a great fabricator, as if to her there was no veil between what was real and what was not. It all existed together.

Zoey's four neighbors were all now home. She'd just watched the man with a night job, Mac, come in. Squares of light from his doors spread onto his patio. Across the garden, Charlotte-the-artist had already gone to bed, presumably with the young man she'd brought home with her earlier. Zoey had watched from the balcony as Charlotte had gestured for the young man to be quiet as they'd entered the garden. She'd pointed to Lizbeth Lime's condo, as if not wanting any noise to bring out her neighbor.

As for Lizbeth herself, she was still up, all her lights blazing. Her sister Lucy's lights were out, but the pulse of a small orange ember was flickering near her doors, as if Lucy might be smoking a cigarette inside alone in the dark.

Zoey knew she should probably go in and try to sleep. It had a been a long day. But being inside made her feel closed-in and lonely. And Pigeon was still out. She could hear the *whoosh* of her wings right now as she flew over the garden to peer into the low trees, curious about the dellawisps. Pigeon was very selective about whom she chose to honor with her presence. She was probably wondering if the little turquoise chatterboxes were worth the trouble to get to know.

Pigeon was obviously trying to make the best of the situation, but she hadn't wanted to move here. Judging by the years she tipped over glasses and stole trinkets belonging to Zoey's father and stepmother, generally trying to make their lives miserable, Pigeon hadn't wanted to stay in Tulsa, either. Sometimes there

was no pleasing that bird. She nearly drove Zoey crazy on the plane that morning, perched on her head, pecking at her hair—hence Zoey’s decision to make her stay in her cage on the cab ride. It made no sense to Zoey why Pigeon chose to travel with her instead of just flying herself here.

But then, an invisible bird made no sense by definition.

Pigeon swooped close by Zoey’s head, nearly catching her hair. Zoey put her hands up to bat her away. Pigeon always did this when she thought Zoey was spending too much time in her own head. Pigeon believed in action, in being realistic, which Zoey had always thought was a tad hypocritical.

She heard Pigeon land in the wicker birdcage Zoey had put on top of the pink refrigerator. She cooed for Zoey to come in, but Zoey didn’t want to. She was so wound up that it felt like a current was buzzing through her. She had the strangest feeling something was about to happen.

God is holding His breath.

Her skin prickled. She could almost hear the words, as if her mother were right beside her, whispering in her ear. It made her uneasy but she didn’t know why. Hadn’t that been the reason she’d chosen to go to college here? So she could move into this condo and feel closer to her mother, to have someplace to come to on breaks, someplace that finally felt like home?

At that moment, the patio doors to Charlotte’s condo opened and the young man Charlotte had brought home earlier crept out. His skin was covered in swirls of tattoos that seemed to move in the darkness, like something alive. He pushed his long, straight hair out of his face as he strutted through the garden toward the alley gate. He walked like he was smiling to himself, like he’d gotten away with something. The dellawisps flew out of the trees and dive-bombed him when he got too close and he ran away, cursing softly into the night.

Pigeon cooed again and Zoey reluctantly got up and walked in, saying, “I think I’m going to try to make friends with them—Charlotte-the-artist and Mac-with-a-night-job and the Limes.” She wondered if she even remembered how to do it. Her last real friend had been Ingrid, in middle school. But surely it wouldn’t be that hard.

Pigeon’s silence told Zoey that she didn’t like this idea.

“What else am I supposed to do this summer?”

Zoey heard Pigeon flap her wings impatiently as if to say Zoey probably should have thought about that before coming here. There were a lot of things Zoey probably should have thought about. Like how she was going to get groceries, for instance.

Earlier, she'd asked Frasier if there was a store within walking distance. Zoey had a car, one she dearly loved, which she'd bought last summer. But it wasn't scheduled to be delivered to her on the island for another few weeks. Frasier had directed her to a touristy specialty market down the street. Zoey had never bought herself real groceries before. The closest she'd ever come were the potato chips and white bread she bought at a convenience store on her way home from her after-school job at Kello's. Potato chip sandwiches were one of the few things she remembered her mother making for her. Her mother had had more money than she'd known what to do with in her adult life, but she'd always eaten like she was still a starving girl, lost on a boat trying to make her way to America. Zoey's father had been the very opposite of hands-on when it had come to raising Zoey after her mother died, but it now boggled Zoey's mind the basic things that supernaturally appeared when you lived with other people—things like salt and butter and soap and toilet paper. Zoey had been adding new things to her list all evening.

She went to the refrigerator to look inside again at the neat rows of Snapple and Orangina and the blocks of cheese and the softball-sized tomatoes she'd bought earlier. It was like looking in a mirror after a dramatic haircut and not quite recognizing herself. Who was this person with hard cheese in her pink refrigerator? When she opened the door, a shaft of bright light arced into the darkness of the condo. The small bottles of Orangina rattled but didn't mask the heavy *thump* that suddenly came from one of the units below.

Startled, Zoey closed the door and turned. She went back to the balcony and saw that Mac, a large redheaded man, had opened his door and was looking out into the garden, as if he'd heard the sound, too.

Something had just happened, something strange.

It left a quiet, ghostly feeling around them.

Zoey had spent too much of her life as an outsider to ever think of running to anyone when she was afraid. It wasn't that she was particularly brave, she just didn't want the disappointment of being turned away. But right now she felt a painful longing for something she couldn't name. She thought wildly of texting her dad, but he hadn't responded to her last text, when she'd told him her plane had arrived safely in Charleston.

She watched Mac step back inside and shut his patio doors, seemingly satisfied that nothing was amiss.

Before Zoey closed her own balcony doors and locked them, her eyes fell on Lucy Lime's unit. The ember of a cigarette was still glowing near the glass doors

in the dark, as if Lucy was watching everything.

And Zoey had the oddest feeling that Lucy knew exactly what had just happened.