

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE ROSE CODE*

KATE
QUINN



A NOVEL

THE
BRIAR CLUB

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Kate Quinn

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

For all the women in my life who make up my Briar Club, the ones who bring each other food and wine and counsel whenever it's needed. The ones who wouldn't bat an eyelash at a corpse on the floor. You know who you are.

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Prologue

*Thanksgiving 1954
Washington, D.C.*

If these walls could talk. Well, they may not be talking, but they are certainly listening. And watching.

Briarwood House is as old as the century. The house has presided—brick-fronted, four-storied, slightly dilapidated—over the square below for fifty-four years. It's seen three wars, ten presidents, and countless tenants . . . but until tonight, never a murder. Now its walls smell of turkey, pumpkin pie, and blood, and the house is shocked down to its foundations.

Also, just a little bit thrilled. This is the most excitement Briarwood House has had in *decades*.

Murder. Murder here in the heart of sleepy white-picket-fence Washington, D.C.! And on Thanksgiving, too. Not that the house is terribly surprised by that; it's held enough holidays to know that when you throw all that family together and mix with too much rum punch and buried resentment, blood is bound to be shed sometimes. But the scene that erupted tonight and splashed gore from the threshold to the attic . . .

Goodness, but it's a doozy.

There's a corpse on the floor of the second attic apartment, spilling a lake of blood from a throat cut nearly to the bone. In the front hall below there's a detective scribbling in his notepad. In the kitchen, seventeen people are milling around in varying stages of shock: old and young, male and female, some crying, some silent. And almost all of them, the house knows—having watched the whole thing explode from shocking beginning to even more shocking end—are nursing reasons to fear that they will end the night in handcuffs.

The police detective comes into the kitchen to talk with Briarwood House's owner and landlady, but she's busy having hysterics. The house flutters its curtains, rattles a door or two, takes another peek into the murder scene on the top floor. The green walls of that particular apartment are painted over with a vast, intricate flowered vine, but you'd be hard-pressed to tell what kind of flowers under the blood splatter. This was a very enthusiastic murder, the house muses. Not one moment's hesitation from the hand swinging *that* blade.

"We have not yet identified the deceased, Mrs. Nilsson," the detective is saying to the landlady when the house's attention flits back to the kitchen. "No identification was found on the body."

"Well, I hope you don't expect me to look at it! My nerves being what they are—" She pushes away the glass of water being urged on her by her lanky teenage son.

"We have preliminary reports that the death occurred between six and seven in the evening. I understand you weren't at home at the time, Mrs. Nilsson?"

"I was out at my bridge club. I'm always out at my bridge club on Thursday nights."

"Even on Thanksgiving?" The detective sounds dubious. *If you'd seen as many holidays turn nasty as I have*, the house wants to tell him, *you'd be surprised everyone isn't ducking them*.

"Shocking waste, Thanksgiving. I provide a turkey lunch for my boarders, but that isn't enough for *some* people." Mrs. Nilsson sniffs, eyeing her son, who still hovers with the water glass. "This one won't lift a finger for his mother in the kitchen, but the moment That Woman says she's making a whole turkey in *my* Stratoliner oven—"

Briarwood House doesn't like Mrs. Nilsson. Hasn't liked her since she first crossed the threshold as a bride, complaining before she'd even shaken the rice out of her hair that the halls were too narrow (*My halls! Too narrow!*), and still doesn't like her twenty years down the road. No one else in this kitchen does, either, the house knows perfectly well. People aren't *that* hard to read.

"The body was found in the fourth-floor apartment, the one with green walls." The detective is looking down at his notes, so he misses his first clue: the tense glances that pass shadow-fast among the other sixteen witnesses. Or would *suspects* be a better word? the house wonders. Because it knows something the detective doesn't.

The killer is still very much in this room.

"Can you tell us who rents that top-floor apartment, Mrs. Nilsson?" the detective persists, oblivious.

The landlady gives another sniff, and the house settles in happily to listen. "Mrs. Grace March."

Four and a Half Years Earlier

June 1950

Chapter 1

Pete

Dear Kitty,

*Does the name "Briarwood House" sound auspicious? We shall see!
I wish you were here.*

—Grace

June sunshine poured over the street, the sounds of a jazz saxophone drifted over from next door, somewhere on Capitol Hill Senator McCarthy was waving lists of card-carrying American Commies, and a new guest had come to the Briarwood boardinghouse. Her shadow fell across Pete where he knelt on the front stoop banging a nail into the flapping screen door, and he looked up to register a tall woman with a red beret over a tumble of golden-brown hair.

"Hello there," she said in a soft midwestern drawl, nodding at the sign in the window. "I see you have rooms to rent?"

Pete scrambled upright, dropping his hammer. He'd thought he was being so alert: watching the street over his toolbox, eagle-eyed for any signs of a rumpus. Not that the square ever had much in the way of rumpus, but you never knew. What if some dirty no-good louse from the Warring gang shot up the Amber Club just off the square, making off with a bag of the long green? If that went down

and the feds came sniffing, the word on the street would point to the shadowy figure across the way. *You want the long and short, you talk to the shamus at Briarwood House. Nothing gets past Pistol Pete.* And then Pete would rise, flicking his cigarette and straightening his battered trilby . . .

But instead a woman had walked right up to him while he was tacking down a screen, and he'd nearly dropped his hammer on her ribbon-laced espadrille.

"Mickey Spillane," she said, nodding at the paperback copy of *I, the Jury* he'd set aside on the front stoop after his mother swooped in with a reminder about the screen door. "Your favorite?"

"I, uh. Yes, ma'am. I'm Pete," he added hastily. "Pete Nilsson."

Her wide mouth quirked, and she stooped to pick up his hammer. "Then maybe you could tell me how a lady can get a room here, Hammerin' Pete."

Just like that, Pete fell in love. He been falling in love an awful lot since turning thirteen—sometimes with the girls in his class at Gompers Junior High, mostly with Nora Walsh up in 4A with her soft Irish vowels, occasionally with Arlene Hupp and her bouncy ponytail in 3C—but this dame in the red beret was something special. She was maybe thirty-five or something (old enough to have an interesting past), with a worn suitcase swinging from one hand and a camel coat belted around the kind of figure Detective Mike Hammer (Pete's hero) would have described as a mile of Pennsylvania highway.

And she'd called him *Hammerin' Pete*. He junked *Pistol Pete* on the spot, wishing he could cock his trilby back on his head and drawl *Let me show you the joint, ma'am* but unfortunately he wasn't wearing a trilby, just an old Senators cap, and from inside the house his mother's voice snapped "Pete, who are you gabbing to? Have you finished with that door?"

"Someone's come about the room, Mom. Mrs.—" He looked back, realizing he hadn't asked the woman's name.

"March." Another of those slow, amused smiles. "Mrs. Grace March."

Pete's mother popped out, face pink and irritated over her quilted housecoat, and she gave the newcomer a once-over even as she introduced herself. "Mrs., you said?" Clearly trying to appraise if there was a wedding ring under Mrs. March's white glove. "I run my boardinghouse for ladies only, if you and your husband—"

"I was widowed last year." Mrs. March sounded remarkably composed about that fact, Pete thought.

"Children? Because it's a small room, no space for more than—"

"No, only me." Mrs. March stood swinging her suitcase, and Pete could tell his mother didn't much like being half a head shorter than this prospective tenant.

"Well, I suppose you can leave your luggage in the kitchen and come up to see the room." There was a tone in his mother's voice that Pete heard quite a lot, halfway between grudging and avid—grudging because she didn't trust new people, avid because new boarders meant money—and he knew he shouldn't have uncharitable thoughts about his mother, but he wished she would sound a little more . . . well, *welcoming* when she asked someone into their home. *Don't you want the boarders to like you, Mom?* he'd asked once, hearing her harangue the renter in 3B for leaving water spots in the sink, and his mother had tutted, *Only patsies worry about being liked, Pete. The only thing that matters is whether they pay their rent on time.* He hadn't really had an answer to that—or rather, he knew better than to voice one. If he did, Mom would just let fly with a tight-lipped *Well, don't you sound just like your father when you take that tone.* Hammerin' Pete was a match for any hard case in the District, but one *just-like-your-father* from Mom and he shriveled like he'd been slapped in the puss.

"Would you like a cup of coffee, ma'am?" he asked, opening the door for Mrs. March, and his mother shot him an irritable look.

"How kind"—another smile from the new arrival—"but I believe I'll just see the room."

It's not much of a room, he wanted to tell her as she followed his mother up the stairs. A storage closet up at the top of the old brownstone, off the fourth-floor landing: Pete's mother decided this year that she could cram a boarder in there, and Pete had spent his

last break emptying out the junk, nailing down loose floorboards, and lugging up the tiny icebox so she could advertise there was a kitchenette. But he couldn't honestly believe anybody would want to live in such a shoebox.

"She'll take it," his mother said ten minutes later, sailing down the stairs flushed and jubilant. "Six months paid up front, too, and she looks like a lady. Not that you can tell, these days. Here, before you take that up . . ." Popping the clasps on Grace March's suitcase.

"Mom!" Pete hissed, feeling his ears burn. "I hate it when you do this—"

"Don't be squeamish. You want a dope fiend or a floozy in the attic? Or a *Communist*. Better to snoop now before she digs herself in." Mrs. Nilsson flipped through the tidily folded blouses and skirts with rapid, expert fingers, poked at a big glass mason jar apparently stuffed with nylons, examined the toiletries. Pete stood gnawing his lip, remembering how the English teacher at Gompers Junior High had said that the Latin root of the word *mortification* was "to die" and Pete could see why, because he was so mortified right now he wanted to drop dead here on the worn linoleum of his mother's kitchen. *Please don't find anything*, he prayed, watching her sift through the new boarder's underwear (silky pink and peach stuff, he couldn't help but notice with a burn of shame). The fourth-floor room had already nearly been rented out to a pleasant-looking spinster with a Jersey accent, but when Mom rummaged through *her* suitcase she found a package of what she called Those Things (the kind of rubber things the boys at Gompers boasted about stealing from their older brothers) and there had been an ugly scene before the woman from Jersey was kicked out, all before she even moved *in*, and without getting her just-paid deposit back, either.

Pete was already hoping Mrs. Grace March would be sticking around for a while.

"Well, take it on up." Mrs. Nilsson closed the suitcase, looking vaguely disappointed there hadn't been anything more sinister than a pink needle case. "Hurry back down, now. I need you to weed the tomato patch after you take your sister to the library."

"Yes, Mom." Pete sighed.

"You're a good boy," she said, giving his ear a pinch as he hauled the suitcase toward the first of three flights of stairs.

The door off the right side of the tiny fourth-floor landing stood ajar, but Pete knocked anyway. "Mrs. March?"

"Oh heavens, drop that *Mrs. March* business," her voice floated out. "I keep looking around for my mother-in-law, and not having a mother-in-law anymore is one of the few advantages of being widowed."

"Yes, Mrs. M— Um, Mrs. Grace." He hauled her suitcase inside, embarrassed all over again by just how *tiny* the room was. A narrow twin bed against one wall, a rickety little bureau that doubled as a coffee table, one shabby armchair . . . and his mother might call it a *kitchenette*, but it was really just an icebox the size of a packing crate, with a hot plate balanced on top. Worst of all were the walls: chipped, tilting inward under the slanted roof, painted a faded but still bilious green. *You agreed to live here?* he thought—but Mrs. Grace was ignoring all that. She'd hung up the camel coat and unlaced the espadrilles, padding about in an old floral-printed skirt and what looked like a man's shirt tied up at the waist, and she was heaving up the sash on the window at the end of the room so she could look out at the square below.

"Did my suitcase pass inspection?" she said without turning around, and Pete wanted to die all over again, but she aimed a mischievous smile over one shoulder. "There's a glass mason jar in among my unmentionables. If I haul it out, can you tell me where to fill it up?" She was glancing around the room, which conspicuously lacked a sink.

"The bathroom's on the landing. Sink and, um, toilet, anyway." He felt his ears go red again, saying *toilet* to a lady. "If you want a bath, you'll have to go to the third floor." Where three women already competed for the tub and mirror between seven and eight in the morning. "A word of advice," he found himself saying. "You do *not* want to get between Claire from 3B and Arlene from 3C when they start going at it over whose turn it is for the bathroom."

"I'll keep that in mind." Mrs. Grace, having unlatched the suitcase, shook the mason jar free from a jumble of nylons and blouses. "Would you mind filling that up for me? Hot water, please."

When he came back lugging the sloshing jar, she had unearthed a handful of tea bags, which promptly went into the water, along with the contents of a dozen little sugar packets clearly scavenged from a diner. "Sun tea," she explained, seeing Pete's puzzled expression as she carried the jar to the window and pushed it carefully through to sit on the sunny stone ledge. "Let it steep on a hot porch or warm windowsill for three hours, and you'll never taste anything better. Old Iowa farm recipe."

"Is that where you're from? Iowa?"

"Originally." She stood back, admiring the sun tea sparkling in its jar, but didn't volunteer anything else. "Who's the musician?" she asked, tilting her head as a mellow sax riff on "Sentimental You" waltzed through the window on the warm breeze.

"That's Joe Reiss, next door. He plays at the Amber Club down the street—he's always practicing."

"How many boarders live here altogether?"

"Eight, if Mom's got a full house." He stuck his hands in his pockets, trying a tentative smile. "You'll meet the rest at breakfast. That's between seven and seven thirty every morning," he recited. "Breakfast comes with your rent. Though a lot of our boarders prefer to get breakfast at the Crispy Biscuit on the other side of the square," he felt compelled to add, in all honesty. His mother tried her best, of course she did, but her leathery scrambled eggs and undercooked bacon (slapped down on the dining room table at seven on the dot and removed at seven twenty-nine and fifty-eight seconds) weren't exactly . . . well, the pancakes at the diner on Briar just couldn't be beat, that was all.

"You're quite the man of information, aren't you?" Mrs. Grace took out a pack of Lucky Strikes and shook one out.

"My mother doesn't allow smoking," Pete couldn't help saying.

"I know." Calmly, Mrs. Grace struck a match, lit up, took a long inhale of smoke, and blew it out the open window. "What she doesn't know won't hurt her."

"My mother knows everything," Pete said feelingly. You could never hear her coming; in those house slippers she could pop out of the shadows like a jack-in-the-box. *Always when you've left your coat on the floor, or are just thinking about putting your feet on the sofa,* Pete had heard one of the boarders say. Nora Walsh from 4A, the pretty one with light-brown hair that gleamed in the sun. And Nora wasn't wrong: a coat on the floor or a shoe print on a sofa was the kind of thing Pete's mother couldn't stand—ate her nerve ends raw, Mickey Spillane would have put it. "My mother's had a difficult life," he said loyally. "She just gets a little tense about rules. You know, times being hard and all." Times *were* hard: the war only just receding into the past and the atom bomb waiting to blow the world to kingdom come and now Commies running all over making trouble. At least Senator McCarthy said so.

"It'll be our secret." Mrs. Grace tapped ash out the window, smiling. Even her eyes got in on the smile—golden-brown eyes, like her hair, and they had a way of staying half-lidded, as if she were looking at everything with sleepy amusement. "So, why is this place called Briarwood House?"

"Because we're on the corner of Briar Avenue and Wood Street." *It sounds more refined,* his mother had said when she hand-lettered the sign: BRIARWOOD HOUSE: BOARDING FOR LADIES. *We'll get a better class of boarder that way.* But the house was just a house, Pete thought—a tall narrow brownstone on the nicer edge of Foggy Bottom, not some country manor out of a book like those Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries he'd read last summer.

"How long have you had boarders here, then?"

Pete looked at his shoes. "Since my dad left." He waited for her to pounce on that. Adults always did. But Mrs. Grace just took another long drag off her Lucky Strike, looking around her new home: the lime-green paint, the slanted ceilings, the postage-stamp-size window seat. "It's not much," Pete felt compelled to apologize, but she shook her head.

"All of this"—she gestured with her cigarette, encompassing the sunny windowsill, the skeins of jazz, the clatter of feet on the stairs—"it has potential."

“It does?” Pete felt like he heard that word a lot, generally when adults were telling you why you couldn’t do something *now*, maybe *later*. Look at your peach-fuzz chin in the mirror, and imagine the potential that one day you might need a shave; look at the cars cruising past and imagine the potential of someday driving one. To Pete, the word *potential* really just seemed to mean *a long way off*. Maybe *never*.

“This whole house has potential,” Mrs. Grace said, sounding very definite. “And so do you, Hammerin’ Pete.” She gave another smile, stubbing out her cigarette on the stone window ledge beside the mason jar. “Now scoot. Come back in about three hours—I’ll be unpacked, and you’ll get a glass of sun tea that’ll make you swear you were in heaven.”

But Pete was pretty sure he was already there. He swung out of 4B whistling, and he didn’t stop even when he looked through the half-open door of the landing bathroom and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror over the sink. *Hammerin’ Pete* . . . maybe when he was the toughest gumshoe in town, he’d carry a hammer through his belt: the hammer that took a smash to the Warring gang, brought down the biggest crime family in the District. By then he’d be thirty, not thirteen; he’d have a dashingy blued growth of stubble instead of pimples; he’d have a battered trilby slashing across a cruel cliff of a brow, not a Washington Senators baseball cap.

Yes, he could almost see it. Because he had *potential*. The new boarder said so.

Grace’s Sun Tea

6 to 8 bags of your favorite tea

Honey or sugar

1 lemon, thinly sliced

1. Fill a glass jar with 1 gallon of cool water, preferably boiled.
2. Add the tea bags, cover, and set the jar on a sunny porch or windowsill. Leave in direct sunlight for 3 to 5 hours.

3. Discard the tea bags, then sweeten the tea to taste with honey or sugar. Add the lemon slices, then refrigerate.
4. Enjoy on a summer day with a new friend, while listening to “If I Knew You Were Coming I’d’ve Baked a Cake” by Eileen Barton with the New Yorkers.

Dear Dad, Pete wrote. He was supposed to be doing his homework at the hall table, not to mention helping his little sister with her reading—his mother planted him there every evening to hand out the mail as the boarders came home—but Lina kept wriggling away from her book, and under his math exercises Pete was scratching out a letter to his father. Trying to, anyway. *Lina won't stop listening to The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet on the radio at top volume. Is that why you won't come home?*

He scratched that out. *Lina's listening to Ozzie and Harriet and practicing her reading. She's getting pretty good!*

“What’s that say?” Lina pushed her grubby finger at the third line of her book.

“Sound it out, Lina-kins. H-o-p— What does that say? And then the rest: s-c-o-t-c-h.”

She stuck her lip out. Nine years old, and she read at the level of a seven-year-old. It didn’t help that she had a lazy eye—*strabismus*, Pete reminded himself to call it—but it wasn’t *that* severe, the slight wander of her left eye off-center. There were glasses that could help, their doctor told them, but Mom said no. Too expensive.

“I’ll give you a hint,” Pete coaxed as Lina continued to pout. “It’s a game, and you play it all the time. Come on: *hop*. Now what’s the rest?”

“I don’t knooooow . . .”

“I hear we’ve got a new boarder!” Felicity Orton from 2A waltzed in with a swish of crinoline under her rose-pink skirt, balancing a mixing bowl on one hip and baby Angela on the other. Their newest boarders; Pete’s mom had sniffed that they must have practically moved here straight from the hospital maternity ward. “4B finally rented out?”

“Yes, Mrs. Fliss.” *Fliss* was the English nickname for *Felicity*, she’d told Pete her first day here, English accent burnished a little after nearly seven years in the States, but still very princessy and exotic to Pete. *At least now it’s Mrs. Fliss—Miss Fliss was just frightful!* Pete had stood there trying to remember that quote about a rose by any name smelling just as sweet, but by the time he pulled it together in his head, she’d been gone. “Would you like your mail?” Pete asked now, passing over the packets he’d sorted earlier. “Letter from San Diego.”

She smiled to see her husband’s handwriting on the envelope, juggling the baby so she could tuck it into her pocket. “What I’d like is to use your oven!” Everything she said seemed to be painted up with exclamation points and deep dimples. “I thought I’d make a welcome plate for the newcomer—you think she likes sugar biscuits? Cookies,” she corrected herself. “You Yanks say *cookies*, not *biscuits*.”

Lina popped her head over her book. “I like sugar cookies,” she volunteered, eyes glommed onto Mrs. Fliss as sticky as Elmer’s Glue.

“First cookie’s for you!” Mrs. Fliss promised, but Pete heard the slight sigh behind the bubbly cheer. If you got Lina stuck on you, she was apt to *stay* stuck for the rest of the day, glowering and sulking if you tried to peel her off. But Mrs. Fliss smiled brightly, dimples reappearing to bracket her pink-lipsticked mouth. “The dough’s all mixed, I just need ten minutes at one ninety. No, three seventy-five,” she corrected herself with a sigh. “All these years and I still think in Celsius. May I—”

Technically, boarders weren’t allowed to use the kitchen, but Pete’s mother relaxed her rules sometimes for Fliss, who was neat as a pin and always left cookies in thank-you. “Go on in,” Pete said, blowing a raspberry at tiny Angela to make her gurgle. The baby was always so pink and pretty in her little lacy caps; Mrs. Fliss was even prettier with her perky flipped hair and swishy skirts . . . She was married, of course (her husband was an army doctor finishing his stint out at the base in San Diego, which was why she was in a boardinghouse), but she smelled like sugar and cinnamon and she was always nice to Pete, so he couldn’t help but gaze after her wistfully as she clicked past into the kitchen.