

A woman with blonde hair, seen from the side and back, wears a shimmering gold sequined dress with a low back and a full, flowing skirt. She is standing against a dark, solid background.

# THE LAST SECRET OF LILY ADAMS

*a novel*

SARA BLAYDES

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# CHAPTER ONE

*Carolyn*

*August, Present Day*

Emily and I had been driving for fifteen hours, and she still hadn't said a word to me. She answered my questions with grunts and shrugs, never once looking up from her phone while her thin fingers typed an endless stream of words into the silent keypad. She was talking to someone, just not me.

The fuel light flashed just outside Bakersfield. I eased the pressure on the gas pedal and scanned the upcoming highway signs for a gas station symbol. Em thought it was ridiculous we weren't flying down, but I was convinced this was the way I would get my daughter to open up to me. Just the two of us, trapped inside four thousand pounds of steel and glass with nothing to talk about except all that had gone wrong over the last year.

I pulled off the highway at the next exit. Em jumped out of the car to fill the tank without being asked. That was the thing about my daughter. There were no frayed edges. No loose threads to unravel her with. She was good and pure, even when she hated me, keeping everything so tightly wrapped up. I couldn't find a way in.

Until now.

Her phone sat forgotten in the cup holder next to a pack of gum and an old ballpoint pen. The answer I needed was in there somewhere, locked behind a four-digit passcode.

I took a deep breath and reached for it.

“Mom?”

I jerked my hand back. “Yeah?”

Em leaned through the open passenger window. It always took me a moment to adjust to the sight of her looking so grown-up, a teenager now who didn't instinctively smile when she looked at me the way she had as a child. Her hair was down to her shoulders, the tips a faded blue from the temporary dye I'd let her use a few weeks ago. "Red Vines or Skittles?"

The sound of her voice felt like a precious gift after so many hours of silence. "Red Vines. Obviously. Didn't I raise you better than to ask a question like that?"

My attempt at a joke felt awkward and stilted, like we were children in a school play. Em stared back at me as though she'd forgotten her lines. There was a time when teasing each other came as naturally as breathing. But that was before the divorce. Back when we still believed we were a perfect, happy family.

Finally, she shook her head and shoved her hand into the car, holding it palm upward. "Then I'm going to need some more money, because there's no way we're not getting Skittles."

"Sure, of course." I reached for my purse in the back seat and handed her a twenty-dollar bill to cover the snacks. "Get me a bottle of water, okay?"

I held my breath as I watched her disappear into the gas station, second-guessing my decision not to go with her. My therapist's words rebounded against my fears like a racquetball. *You need to give her space if you want her to trust you. You can't control everything.* I knew he was right. I just didn't know how to be okay with it.

Through the windows of the gas station, I saw her standing in front of the rows of potato chips. This was my chance. Maybe my only one. With a trembling hand, I picked up her phone and typed in the passcode she didn't know I knew. I scanned the device, unsure of what exactly I was looking for. All her social media apps had been deleted. But there was something unusual. A small gold icon in the shape of a lock and key with the words KEEP OUT below. My finger hesitated, hovering over it. Once I did this, there would be no turning back. With a deep breath, I tapped the icon, revealing a note page that resembled a diary.

**August 8**

**Mom says this trip will be a good bonding experience. I don't think she believes that. Dad said the same thing to me, so I know it's bullshit. I think it will be good for her. She needs a distraction. Maybe she'll stop asking me—**

The squeal of tires made me jerk my head up. The Camaro that had been filling up beside us sped out of the gas station. Em was coming back. I closed the app and put her phone back in the cup holder where she'd left it.

She leaned through the open window. "Got your water."

I uncapped the bottle and drank half of it in one long gulp.

When she was back in the car, she tore open the bag of Red Vines and held it out to me. I greedily pulled out a handful of licorice and bit into the tops.

Em groaned. "You're supposed to eat them one at a time."

"Nope," I said around another bite, trying not to show the relief I felt that I hadn't been caught. If she knew I'd been looking at her phone, she would never forgive me. "Grandma Lily taught me to eat them this way."

"The wrong way," she muttered, tearing into a bag of salt-and-vinegar chips.

The realization I would never eat candy or watch movies or talk about anything with my grandmother again made the lingering ache in my chest swell like an ember blown to life. "When we get to Grandma Lily's house, we're going to eat real food. Vegetables."

"Potatoes are a vegetable—" Em's brows pulled together, a look of confusion on her sweet face. "Did you touch my phone?"

Panic rushed up in my chest. "I . . . I was checking the time. I'm hoping we can get to LA before dark."

She nodded, accepting my excuse, but there was no confidence in it. "Don't touch my phone again."

"Okay," I said shakily.

She tilted the bag of Red Vines in my direction. A peace offering.

"Thanks."

"One at a time, Mom."

I gave an exaggerated sigh. "Fine. I'll eat them the wrong way."

She didn't laugh or smile or roll her eyes. She just turned and stared out the window as if I hadn't said anything at all.

I started the car and pulled out of the gas station, relief pounding in my veins. Relief that I hadn't been caught. Relief that she wasn't keeping whatever horrible thing was eating her up inside entirely to herself. And relief because a part of me was too afraid to hear the answers. Because, deep down, I knew that everything wrong with my daughter was entirely my fault.



It took us another two hours to reach my grandmother's house. The homes in this part of town were modest but well kept, far from the beachfronts of Malibu or the sprawling mansions of Bel-Air. Not the kind of neighborhood where you expected to find someone like the great Lily Adams living.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel as the navigation system barked out directions for Lily's street. It had been only a few months since I'd last been here, but everything felt unfamiliar now. A dozen reporters had called after my grandmother's death, asking questions about her life that most of the world had long forgotten about. Even if I hadn't been consumed by grief, I couldn't have given them any answers. All the questions I never had the chance to ask her were lost forever.

"This is it?" Em's gaze bounced between the navigation system on the dashboard and the simple rancher with wood siding tucked away on a corner lot framed by a symmetrical boxwood hedge.

"This is it." I pulled the car up the curving driveway and killed the ignition. The last time Em visited here was when she was eight or nine years old. She was fourteen now. Too much time had passed to hold on to any memories of the house.

"I thought it was bigger."

I tried not to wince at Em's disappointment. This home had once been my refuge. A place filled with love and comfort and happiness. I hoped it could be that for Em, too, but I hadn't dared tell her that yet. It was one of the many things I'd lost my courage to talk to her about on

the drive. “It was probably quite nice for its time when Grandma Lily bought the home.”

“Nice is for normal people. She was rich enough to afford a giant estate.”

I shook my head. “Things were different back then. Hollywood actors didn’t make the kind of money they do now.”

The way Em talked about her great-grandmother sat uncomfortably in my chest. She hadn’t grown up here like I did. She didn’t have the memories of Lily baking cookies or splashing in the pool with me in the summer. She’d never worn Halloween costumes and first day of school outfits my grandmother had sewn so expertly, I was the envy of all my friends. She didn’t know her great-grandmother as a person. Em knew more about Lily from old tabloid articles on the internet than she did from any memories of the woman.

My legs felt hollow and stiff as death when we got out of the car. But the house was in better shape than I expected. The lawn had been mowed sometime in the last few weeks.

A musty odor greeted us when I unlocked the front door. Em wrinkled her nose. But it wasn’t the smell that made me shiver. It was the eerie stillness. Everything was exactly where I remembered it. The Tiffany chandelier hanging above the dining table. The old Singer sewing machine table next to the floral sofa. Everything was right where it belonged, except for my grandmother. This wasn’t a home anymore. It was a corpse with its heart ripped out.

“It’s so small,” Em said.

“That’s a good thing. It will make our job easier. Can you imagine if she had one of those megamansions? We would be cleaning out the place for years.”

A stack of mail sat on the kitchen counter. I opened the fridge door, expecting a disaster, but it was completely empty and clean.

Em opened a random cupboard that contained only a box of Raisin Bran. “I don’t get it. Why didn’t she keep making movies so she could buy a place like that?”

I shrugged. The reason why Lily Adams stepped out of the spotlight at the height of her career was a mystery even to those closest to her. It was easy enough to assume she left Hollywood to marry my grandfather and raise a family, but something about that explanation never rang true.

Plenty of actresses made comebacks after having children. Grandma Lily loved acting. I could see it in the sadness of her eyes when we cuddled up on the couch to watch old black-and-white movies. Sometimes, she would tell me G-rated stories about the different stars she'd hobnobbed with in place of a bedtime story. But those were the rare exceptions. Most of the time, she didn't like to talk about it. She would get a sad expression in her eyes when I asked about her Hollywood years and tell me it was a conversation for another time.

“This is Nana?”

I followed Em into the living room to find her staring at the framed movie posters hanging on the living room wall. In one, she was dancing arm in arm with a handsome, dark-haired man. In another, she was dressed in a nurse's uniform, flashing her famous dimpled smile.

Em looked at me, a serious expression on her face. “We’re not giving these away, right?”

My stomach clenched. The instructions left for me in the will were clear. No funeral. Instead, my grandmother wanted all items of historical value to be donated to the Golden Age Museum for an exhibit about her life. “I’m not sure yet. It will depend on whether they’re valuable, I suppose.”

“If they’re valuable, we should keep them.” She focused on the posters, studying the details like I had so many times before.

I didn’t understand why, after a life spent hiding from the spotlight, my grandmother wanted her history on display for the entire world to see. It would probably take a couple weeks of hard work to sort through everything, but I was grateful for the chance to come back here one last time before the house was sold. For two weeks, Em and I would have nothing but uninterrupted time together.

“Em?”

“Yeah?”

*Tell me how to make you open up to me again.* “Can you help me get the bags from the car?”

“Sure.”

She easily hauled our large suitcases out of the trunk, despite their weight. I struggled with the telescoping handle of my suitcase, regretting my decision to buy the cheapest one I could find. The plastic wheels

were stuck against their casters, making the entire thing impossible to pull.

“I’ve got it.” She took the suitcase, easily freeing the handle, and rolled it into the house. Inside, she paused at the long hallway that stretched down the left side of the house, where the three bedrooms were located. “Where do you want this?”

“Why don’t you pick a room first?”

She jumped in and out of each room with ruthless efficiency while I lumbered behind her. After she reached the last bedroom at the end of the hall, she popped her head out the door and asked, “Can I have this one?”

“Of course. That was my mother’s room. I loved the butterfly wallpaper.” It had been mine, too. My mom and I had moved back in with my grandparents when I was two years old. She was a nurse working long, unpredictable hours and needed help watching me. She died in a car accident when I was seven, leaving a gaping hole in my heart that had only grown bigger with time.

“Are you going to stay in Nana’s room?”

I shook my head. “I’ll stay in the guest bedroom.” Not because I believed in ghosts or bad omens or anything like that. Because the guest bedroom was closer to the one where Emily would be. It was a silly way to be closer to her, but I didn’t tell her that.

I dragged my suitcase into the guest bedroom. It was painted a shade of lilac that hadn’t been fashionable in decades. Grandma Lily had lived here for more than seventy years. Thirty-six of those with my grandfather. So much stuff had accumulated. So many memories. I sat down on the edge of the bed and closed my eyes, giving in to the exhaustion of the long drive.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Tom was texting me.

**Have you arrived yet?**

I quickly typed back. **Just got here.**

**How’s Em? Tell her to call me.**

**She’s fine.**

I watched the screen for a few long minutes, waiting to see if he had anything else to say. I didn't miss him. I didn't even regret the divorce, despite the way he'd surprised me with it. But I still hadn't gotten used to not mattering anymore.

My stomach clenched as I looked for Em to deliver her dad's message. She wasn't in her room, though. "Em?"

"In Nana's room."

She stood with her back to me when I entered the room. "Em, your dad—"

"Look at this."

I peered over her shoulder to see a thin blue coil-bound notebook in her hands. "What is it?"

"It's a diary," she said, dark eyes scanning the words. "But there was a note on top addressed to you."

She passed it to me. I unfolded the note and read it.

Dear Carolyn,

There is so much I need to tell you. I used to believe that it was simply that I couldn't find the right words. As it turns out, courage is what I lacked. What if you didn't understand? What if you never forgave me? I never thought of myself as a coward, but as a protector. But the world is a different place now, and some secrets need to come out.

I've held on to mine too long.

My story begins and ends with Stella Lane.

Soon you will understand what that means. I'm sorry I could never find the strength to tell you myself.

Love,

Grandma

"Mom?" Em bit her lip, looking up with wide eyes. "What did Nana mean by that?"

I shook my head. "I don't know." I flipped through the pages of the notebook, scanning the words for any clue. Inside was my grandmother's account of her past. The saturated blue ink suggested it was written down recently. But within a few pages, her familiar slanted script with

tightly looped *l*'s and exaggerated *y*'s gave way to shaky, childlike letters and finally indecipherable scribbles.

Em peered over my shoulder, studying the diary. "Why is it like that?"

"It must have been her dementia." My throat was tight and dry with grief. There was something desperately important my grandmother wanted to tell me, but it was lost forever to a terrible disease.

"Who's Stella Lane?"

I tightened my grip on the notebook, forcing a calmness into my voice as my heart raced in my chest. "She was a famous actress, around the same time as Nana."

"Were they friends?"

I shook my head. "Nana never spoke about her. Ever. I didn't realize they even knew each other."

"Then why did she matter to Nana? That doesn't make sense. Do you know anything else about her?"

"One thing," I said reluctantly. The same thing the entire world knew about Stella Lane. The thing that made her infamous, even now, seventy years later. "She was brutally murdered. Her killer was never found."