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CAT SEBASTIAN



# *You Should Be So Lucky*

A Novel



“Cat Sebastian is my desert island author.”  
—*New York Times* bestselling author  
Olivie Blake

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So Lucky*

A Novel

**CAT SEBASTIAN**



*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*



# Dedication

*For V, who knows what she did*

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Part I  
**May**

## Chapter One

1960

After a year of doing basically nothing—although Lilian is forever clapping him on the shoulder and earnestly telling him that survival is something, it's *wonderful*, darling, a testament to his *strength*—Mark Bailey finds that it's a bit of a shock to the system to discover he's in the middle of a meeting with his boss.

Sure, they're in a grimy Irish bar instead of the *Chronicle's* wood-paneled conference room, and they're drinking watered-down gin instead of coffee, and nobody's there to take notes or waste time by talking about golf, but it's still a meeting no matter how Mark looks at it, God help him.

“So here's the problem,” Andy says. Andy is—well, when he isn't busy being Andrew Fleming III, the *Chronicle's* publisher, he and Mark are friends, or whatever you call it when you're both queer and work at the same place and keep one another's secrets.

“We need to convert weekday commute readers to Sunday subscription readers,” Andy goes on. “The Sunday paper is where we make money.”

Mark's been hearing versions of this for months. After three drinks, Andy's capable of delivering an entire lecture, complete with pie charts drawn on the backs of cocktail napkins, about return on investment, dwindling ad sales, and how television will be the ruination of the free press. It's all unspeakably boring, and the only reason Mark hasn't put a stop to it is that it would take an awful lot of energy that he simply does not have.



“A new Sunday magazine is going to replace the old pullout supplement starting in July,” Andy goes on. “It’ll be glossy and in full color, and we want it to attract a different set of readers. I was looking at those articles you wrote a couple years back for *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*, and even some of the longer pieces you used to write for our arts and culture section. That’s exactly what I want.”

Andy’s being tactful by not saying something like “back when you used to do actual work instead of writing book reviews every few months for fifty-dollar checks that you forget to cash.” Technically, Mark resigned in February 1959 but never quite got out of the habit of coming in to work. This may be pushing the envelope on eccentricity, but he’s pretty sure that ship has sailed; he’s firmly in Miss Havisham territory now, haunting the dusty and half-empty fifth floor of the *Chronicle* building, an eldritch entity that junior reporters warn one another about.

“According to market research,” Andy goes on, “sports coverage is one of the top reasons people buy the paper, so I’m thinking the magazine needs stories with a sports angle.”

All this strikes Mark as exceptionally pie-in-the-sky; he’s not optimistic by nature and even less so where newspapers are concerned. If Andy didn’t look like a man about to ask a favor, he’d assume this had nothing to do with him. His magazine features were mostly profiles of architects and fashion designers. He hasn’t written a word about sports since he was on his high school newspaper, nursing an ill-fated crush on the quarterback.

Mark drains his gin and waves the bartender over for some more. “You need a highbrow sports feature for the magazine, and you want me to write it.”

“Yes,” says Andy, drawing out the syllable and looking at his drink instead of at Mark. “You know when a paper publishes a weekly diary by an athlete over the course of a season?”

Mark scoffs. “I don’t think any of those have ever actually been written by the ballplayer. It’s always some poor bastard in the sports department . . .” He trails off as Andy’s meaning makes its way through the haze of gin. “No. Absolutely not. I’m not ghostwriting a ballplayer diary. I can’t think of anyone on your entire staff less qualified.”

“Nonsense. You follow the game. You and Nick complain about the Yankees every time we see you, and I know you were pleased to hear about the Robins coming to New York, because you said so, in my own kitchen.”

Mark glares at Andy. Surely, using his own words against him counts as emotional blackmail. He and Nick have been paying attention to the trials and travails of the city's new baseball team—Nick because he loves baseball, and Mark because he loves drama. But Mark doesn't follow the game; a passing familiarity with baseball is something he caught, like the measles, not something he did on purpose.

"Why can't you have one of the junior sportswriters do it? Or someone else who can be motivated by an extra ten dollars a week?"

Andy goes back to swirling the ice around in his glass. "Well, the player I was thinking of might need special treatment."

"What player do you have in mind?"

"That new shortstop. O'Leary."

"You think people want to read a diary by a guy who threw a tantrum in public after he was traded here? And who's barely managed to hit the ball since then?" Mark cannot think of anything more likely to get someone to throw their paper directly into the nearest trash can.

"There has to be more to him than that," Andy suggests.

"He called the manager a drunken psychopath, the team a bunch of talentless layabouts, and the owners a couple of debutantes." Mark has seen these phrases printed in every paper he reads and has heard them repeated everywhere from the subway to the *Chronicle* break room.

Andy shrugs. "Is any of that wrong, though?"

Mark snorts. "Probably not," he concedes. "There's no way the Robins will let him within ten yards of a reporter."

"They're operating under the idea that any press is good press if it gets people to the stadium."

"Still, it ought to be a sportswriter who does it."

"Well, that's the problem. Half the sports desk staff have publicly insulted O'Leary. The other half, well. Nobody's going to believe O'Leary wrote this diary if it's filled with aw-shucks earnestness. It would have to have an edge."

"Andy," Mark says, laughing despite himself. "Are you calling me mean?"

"No," Andy protests. He's a terrible liar. "Just—cynical, maybe. When you want to be. Anyway, writing the weekly diary would get you access to the team, which you can use to write the magazine feature. I'd like to run it the first Sunday in October. If you're up to it, that is." He's offering Mark a

graceful out, and Mark's tempted to take it. "But with the magazine about to take over the fifth floor, it would be nice to have an excuse for you to keep that office."

At the idea that he might lose his office, Mark feels a faint stirring of panic. Where would he go all day? Where, other than that office on the semi-deserted fifth floor of the *Chronicle* building, could he be allowed to hide away, spending what Lilian persists in calling the Best Years of His Life organizing paper clips by size and hoarding all the best pens?

The *Chronicle*—the familiarity of it all, from his typewriter with its sticky *F* to the people he sees in the elevator—has kept him afloat this past year. He has to get out of bed because he has to brush his teeth; he has to brush his teeth because he has to go to work. There's a rhythm to his day that he doesn't exactly enjoy, but at least it exists, and it carries him along until it's the next morning and he does it all again.

That afternoon, when he unlocks his door, Lula lets out a single sharp bark, as if determined to let him know there's another reason for Mark to get out of bed every morning, and that's to be a wire-haired terrier's indentured servant.

Mark leans down to scratch the dog's head, and she gives him a sad look. *I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed*, she communicates with every bark, every look, every nap spent slumped against the door, waiting for someone who's never going to come home. But honestly, it's an unspeakable relief that the dog hasn't moved on, either.

Everyone—well, the handful of people who actually *know*—has been telling him that eventually he'll go back to normal, but after a year of this, Mark's increasingly certain that everyone is full of shit. Or, more likely, they simply don't understand, and good for them. Mark's genuinely happy for them.

He slips Lula's leash on and lets her drag him back outside. It's warm and breezy, the sort of weather that makes people in the city flirt with the idea of sidewalk cafés and picnics, before remembering that exhaust fumes don't go with most meals.

The dog leads him along the same route she's taken for the entire eight years Mark's known her: around the perimeter of Gramercy Park, then south on Irving Place with a pointed digging in of the heels in front of a bakery. "No, Lula," he says, just like he always does. "We're not going in today."

Back at home, Lula takes up sentry by the kitchen cupboard that houses the dog food. It's the stuff that comes in cans, which is both unreasonably expensive and unfathomably smelly, but that's what William always bought, and it isn't like Mark is about to ruin this poor animal's life even further by purchasing substandard dog food. William raised Lula to have *taste*, and far be it from Mark to second-guess either of them.

The fact that he can calmly formulate that thought surely has to count for something. But it turns out that what's on the other side of last year's brittle fragility isn't *normal* but something grayscale and hollowed out. Mark is . . . fine: he paid his taxes on time and he went to the dentist when his tooth hurt. He isn't in any danger of throwing himself out of windows or acquiring interesting new habits of self-destruction.

It's just that when he tries to figure out what the point is in getting out of bed every morning, he doesn't have the answer. Even work—which had always been *an* answer, at least—feels flat and dull, like there's nothing left in the world worth writing about. He's made sure not to tell Lilian about this or she might get that terribly sad face again, and then he'll have to endure her and Maureen having him over for dinner and relentless sympathy while the whole time they look at him like he's the ghost of Christmas yet to come.

The dog barks, and Mark realizes he's paused with his hand on the can opener. He opens the can and dumps its appalling contents into the little bowl with the dog bone painted inside that they picked up on vacation in Marseilles years ago.

He ought to do something about his own dinner, but instead he turns on the television with the half-formed intention of smugly watching a quiz show—he takes his thrills where he finds them, these days. The television is tuned in to a baseball game, though. The commentators are going on about how O'Leary's been batting literally zero since getting traded. That's almost impressively terrible. Hadn't there been talk last season about him being rookie of the year?

Mark kneels in front of the television until O'Leary's at bat. He knows from occasional glances at the sports page that Eddie O'Leary has been talked about as having the prettiest swing in baseball. What Mark sees today doesn't have anything pretty about it. It is, frankly, a mess. It looks like it physically hurts, like O'Leary's body is doing something it has no business even trying.

O’Leary strikes out and then—Mark winces—snaps the bat over his knee. What an absolute *infant*, having tantrums in public. Mark isn’t sure how much you can tell about someone’s demeanor from grainy black-and-white television footage, but O’Leary looks defeated as he returns to the dugout.

\* \* \*

Mark spreads the *Chronicle*’s clippings on O’Leary across the dining room table in chronological order. They make a depressing tableau. You can almost hear the hushed, reverent awe with which reporters last spring talked about O’Leary’s future. By the fall, columnists who ought to know better were openly comparing him to Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio, throwing around rookie-year stats and acting like starry-eyed children. When O’Leary went and started this season by batting .500 in the month of April, an embarrassing array of superlatives began appearing alongside his name.

He was good, Mark will give him that, no question. But what’s probably just as relevant is that he’s good-looking. He looks like he fell out of a Renaissance painting, all golden curls and blue eyes and excessive muscles. He really is very handsome, but in a way that feels obvious, like if you asked an artist with no imagination to draw you an attractive man.

And he’s white—that still matters, even a decade after most baseball teams integrated. There are plenty of people who *of course* aren’t prejudiced, how *dare* you suggest it, but who are demonstrably reassured by the existence of talented white athletes. Eddie O’Leary must have seemed like an answer to their bigoted little prayers.

Mark turns his attention to the final section of clippings, by far the most abundant, those dating since O’Leary’s early season trade from the Kansas City Athletics to the Robins. Mark knows what happened—everyone who pays even casual attention to New York sports knows what happened. News of the trade broke toward the end of a game; O’Leary, when informed by an opportunistic reporter in the locker room, proceeded to insult everyone on his new team. It’s bad luck that television cameras were in the locker room, but that’s all the more reason for O’Leary to have made an effort to control himself. He had to know that once the cameras picked up on his tirade, the newspapers would have no choice but to write about it, however loath sportswriters usually are to tarnish the heroes their readers demand.

Mark has little patience for people who can't muster up a minimum degree of self-control. They're spoiled children. Most people would be arrested, beaten, fired, or disowned if they didn't keep a tight leash on their emotions and reactions, but the Eddie O'Learys of the world think they can do whatever they please.

But a stray phrase catches his eye, something from a Kansas City paper—whichever's in charge of news clippings at the *Chronicle* has made a thorough job of it. It's the beginning of O'Leary's rant—or, rather, what preceded it. "That can't be," O'Leary told the reporter who had broken the news to him. "That can't be right."

Mark reads the rest of the article. O'Leary shared a house with three teammates, and every few weeks his widowed mother drove out from Omaha to see her only child play.

*That can't be* now seems to carry a decisively mournful note. O'Leary was having his life uprooted, his life as he knew it taken away, and it was happening on *television*.

Mark is being, he realizes with a shudder, *soft-hearted*—an alarming new tendency. The other day he found himself looking charitably upon the hellion upstairs whose violin practice used to make him long for the quiet of the grave. Whatever cracks in his psyche the past year left in its wake, there's plenty of room now for this sort of thing to creep in.

Still, though. This is an angle for the magazine feature Andy wants. A broken-hearted Eddie O'Leary whose game fell apart at the same time his life fell apart is a far fresher story than a badly behaved child who isn't playing his best for the straightforward reason that he resents his luckless new team; there are six of those articles sitting right now on his dining room table. And Mark remembers the palpable sense of doom that O'Leary had radiated, even through a television screen. The idea that this kid is grieving isn't entirely in Mark's head, even if O'Leary *is* a spoiled brat. On any other team, he'd be on his way to the minors to endure this slump in relative private, but the Robins are bad enough that one more lousy hitter won't make a difference. Whatever happens to O'Leary is going to happen in front of the nation's largest television market.

It occurs to Mark that what he's witnessing is a disaster. This is a shipwreck, a funeral pyre, a crumbling ruin. What's happening to Eddie O'Leary is an *end*. That's something Mark knows about; that's something Mark can write about.