

A photograph of a swimming pool with a house reflected in the water. The pool is in the foreground, and the house is in the background. The water is clear and blue. The house has white siding and several windows. The pool has a metal ladder on the left side. The sky is blue and clear.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE SOULMATE*

**SALLY
HEPWORTH**

REVENGE
IS
SWEET...

**DARLING
GIRLS**

A NOVEL

DARLING GIRLS



SALLY
HEPWORTH



ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

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*For Jen Enderlin,
who made me an author.
There will never be enough thank-yous
in the world.*

THE OFFICE OF DR. WARREN, PSYCHIATRIST

Dr. Warren sits in a gray folding chair, one ankle resting on the opposite knee. His suit is brown; his tie, red. His thin-rimmed glasses lie against his chest, on a chain. When I knock on the open door, he points to the vacant chair facing him, his gaze fixed on an old-school manila folder in his lap. His bald, liver-spotted head is as waxed and shiny as a freshly buffed sports car.

“Hello,” I say.

No response. After a brief hesitation, I squeak across the floors in my sneakers and sit.

Dr. Warren remains bent over his file.

The room is bare apart from the chairs, a potted plant, and a battered wooden coffee table. While I wait for him to acknowledge me, I observe a couple of sparrows pecking at the peeling paint on the windowsill outside.

“Excuse me,” I say, after several minutes, when Dr. Warren still hasn’t greeted me. The clock on the wall says five past the hour.

He looks up, faintly irritated. “Yes?”

“Are we...” I feel silly. “... going to start?”

He looks at the clock, then back at his paperwork. “Whenever you like.”

I haven’t seen a therapist before, but this feels a little unorthodox. Perhaps he is one of those therapists who uses unconventional means to bring about a particular result—like failing to provide a chair because he believes people get to the heart of things faster when they are uncomfortable?

That, or Dr. Warren is an asshole.

“So I just ... talk?”

“Yes.”

“About what?”

He sighs. “It’s up to you. But I’d suggest that you might want to talk about what happened at Wild Meadows.”

It shouldn’t be jarring, hearing the name of my childhood home spoken in such a familiar way. These days everyone is familiar with Wild Meadows. The media love the juxtaposition of the whimsical country estate and the atrocities that happened therein. They also love anything to do with foster children. The headlines practically wrote themselves.

Wild Meadows or House of Horrors?

The Secrets Buried Beneath the Wild Meadows

What’s Lurking in the Wild Meadows

These headlines have put Wild Meadows on the map. Apparently people even drive up there to see it ... or what’s left of it. But while it’s a headline or novelty to most, it’s my life. The place where I learned about loss, and shame ... and hate.

“I can’t talk about Wild Meadows,” I say. “Not yet.”

Maybe not ever.

Dr. Warren leans back in his chair, clearly disappointed. I don’t like to disappoint people. And yet, if I just come out with it, he won’t understand. No one understands what it was like for me, growing up at Wild Meadows. The suffering that woman caused me. The only ones who understand are those who lived it.

“Well, we can just sit here if you’d prefer.”

He looks back at his file, which I now realize is folded to conceal a newspaper. It confirms something I’d suspected for most of my life: that no one cares.

1

JESSICA

SIX MONTHS EARLIER ...

“Jessica!”

Jessica had nearly escaped through the magnificent double front doors of Debbie Montgomery-Squires’s home when she heard her name. Again.

She had just finished up a “room overhaul.” Three hours of painstakingly ordering her client’s bathroom cabinets into a Pinterest-worthy vision of color-coded, labeled, and stackable containers. The result looked spectacular—all of Debbie’s friends said so. The fact that all of Debbie’s friends were present to say so was the reason Jessica was dangerously close to being late for her next client ... even with the extra fifteen-minute contingency time she built into her schedule.

Her first instinct was to keep walking. Nothing—nothing!—vexed Jessica more than tardiness. Except perhaps messiness. And people who cut corners, or people who missed RSVP deadlines. Jessica always RSVP’d to invitations the moment they landed in her hand or inbox. Then she diarized the event, made a note in her Organization app to buy a gift, if necessary, and created a block of time in her calendar to ensure she had an appropriate outfit to wear. At least forty-eight hours before the event, she decided on appropriate transport and mapped out the approximate time it would take to get there (with fifteen minutes added for contingencies).

Jessica had agreed to today's job only as a personal favor to Tina Valand, a beloved client, who'd purchased the voucher for Debbie as a birthday present and begged Jessica attend personally (rather than sending one of her excellent staff) because "Debbie is such a dear friend."

These days, Jessica could afford to be choosy. Since her home-organization business had taken off a few years back, Jessica left the grunt work to her team of staff while she concentrated on positioning herself as Australia's leading expert on home organization, appearing on *The Morning Show* and *Better Homes and Gardens* with handy tips for a more structured life.

When Debbie finally got around to booking her session with Jessica, she'd done it on the same day she hosted a post-Pilates coffee morning for her class. It wouldn't have bothered Jessica had Debbie not seen fit to bring each woman into the bathroom one by one, announcing, "Jessica is my home-organization whiz" before inviting the guest to tell Jessica all about their own organizational struggles.

"You don't mind, do you, Jessica?" she'd say.

"Of course not, Mrs. Montgomery-Squires," she replied.

Jessica did mind, of course. Now, Jessica was running late for her next job.

"Jessica?" Debbie said again, jogging to catch her at the door.

Jessica sighed. Pasted on a smile. Turned around.

"This is awkward," Debbie said, "but I've noticed some items missing from the bathroom. I feel awful even bringing it up..."

Debbie did not feel awful. Debbie could barely breathe through her delight. Behind her, in the living room, seven women in activewear sipped lattes and pretended not to listen. The eighth leaned forward in her chair and gawked unashamedly.

"I reorganized your bathroom cabinets," Jessica said, trying for patience, "which means everything will be in a slightly different place. I left a cheat sheet showing you how to find—"

"I understand that," she interrupted. "But I've looked carefully."

Jessica wondered how carefully she could have looked in the four minutes that had passed since she left the bathroom. She also wondered if there was a way to go back in time to the moment she agreed to do the job so she could slap herself in the face.

"May I ask what is missing?"

Debbie glanced back toward her Pilates friends, suddenly less assured. She lowered her voice and leaned a little closer. “A bottle of Valium.”

Jessica pulled herself up to her full five-foot-nothing height. She felt humiliated, as well as appalled for service people everywhere. “I can assure you, Mrs. Montgomery-Squires, I have not taken anything from your bathroom. But, if you are concerned, I’d be very happy for you to search my bag.”

She held out the bag, glancing away, over her shoulder as if she couldn’t bear to watch. For a shocking moment, Jessica thought Debbie might actually search it. But the other woman said, “That won’t be necessary.”

After a momentary stalemate, Jessica’s phone began to ring, saving them both from navigating an awkward exit. “Well,” she said, “if there’s nothing else, I do need to get to my next appointment.”

Jessica waited a moment. When Debbie didn’t speak she turned and strode away.

“Love Your Home Organizational Services,” she said as she slid into the leather seats of her new Audi. If the traffic lights were all miraculously green, there was a chance she could still make it on time. She started the car. “Jessica Lovat speaking.”

“Ms. Lovat? My name is...”

There was a pause as the phone synced with the car’s speakers. “Sorry,” Jessica said, pulling into the traffic. “I missed that. Who is calling?”

“My name is Detective Ashleigh Patel.”

No, Jessica wanted to scream. No, no, no.

There was only one reason detectives contacted her. Norah. But Jessica didn’t have time for it today. She’d already used up her fifteen-minute buffer!

“What can I do for you, Detective?” Jessica said.

Last time the police called, her sister had assaulted a minor. Upon investigation, Jessica discovered the “minor” was a fifteen-year-old boy whom she’d jabbed with a broomstick after catching him peering through her window while she was getting dressed one morning. Still, it wasn’t Norah’s first assault, and her motives weren’t always quite so reasonable. The court had imposed a community corrections order; if she reoffended in a twelve-month period, the sentence would be considerably harsher.

“It’s time to stop this pattern of behavior,” the judge said to Norah. “If I see you in this courtroom again, it will be to decide how long you’ll go to prison

for.”

“Did you hear that, Norah,” Jessica had cried on the way home. “Next time you’re going to jail! In the real world, you can’t use violence to deal with your feelings.”

“How do you deal with your feelings in the real world?” Norah had asked.

“You bury them,” Jessica replied. “Good and deep.”

It was a philosophy Jessica had always lived by. But a couple of weeks ago, Jessica had stumbled across an article which claimed that burying toxic feelings could cause cancer. Immediately Jessica decided she must be riddled with cancer. After all, no one repressed more toxic emotions than she did. The idea of a physical manifestation of her suffering held a perverse sort of appeal. She found herself visualizing her insides, admiring the spoils.

“You,” she’d say to the tumor wrapped around her spleen, “were caused by that time I had to bail Norah out of jail for the four thousand five hundred and sixty-seventh time. And you,” she’d say to the masses in her ovaries, “you are the product of every time I had to worry about Alicia. And you,” she’d say to the tumors dotted across her pancreas like confetti, “are the product of my childhood.”

She’d almost been disappointed when her doctor gave her a clean bill of health. All that repressed anger and nothing to show for it.

She’d been repressing anger about it ever since.

“I hope I’m not calling at a bad time,” the detective said. She sounded young and unthreatening and polite—which was something, Jessica supposed.

“I have a few minutes,” Jessica said. She put on her indicator to switch lanes. “What can I do for you?”

A learner driver pulled in front of Jessica, and she had to slam on the brakes to stop from hitting him. The mother waved in apology, and Jessica waved back, repressing her anger yet again.

“It’s a little sensitive, to be honest,” the detective said. “If you’re driving it might be an idea to pull over.”

“I’m not driving,” Jessica lied. She had seventeen minutes to get where she was going—with no allowance for contingencies. She could listen and drive.

“Good. I’m calling to ask for assistance with an investigation I’m working on.”

Jessica frowned. An investigation. Perhaps it would be like the time she was summoned for jury duty? A man was being tried for murder after

strangling his wife in front of their three small children. Of course Jessica had been selected as a juror. A small, neat, thirty-something-year-old woman with honest brown eyes, scrupulous morals and tasteful nude flats—she'd been born for the role. Perhaps the judge had given this detective her name?

“What are you investigating?”

“I understand that you lived at Wild Meadows Farm back when it was a foster home in the 1990s?”

Jessica slammed on the brakes. A cacophony of horns sounded behind her.

Suddenly she understood why the detective had asked if she was driving.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine,” Jessica squeaked. She pulled over to the side of the road, feeling strangely distant from her body.

“As you may or may not have heard, Wild Meadows has recently been demolished to build a McDonald's.”

Jessica *had* heard. Even though she was now living in inner-city Melbourne, a two-hour drive—and another world—away from the country town where she grew up, her meticulous level of organization in all aspects of her life meant she kept tabs on everything she needed to know—and quite a lot that she didn't. She probably had a better idea of the goings-on in Port Agatha than most of the locals.

“Well,” the detective continued, “the excavators had to dig quite deep to make room for the parking lot, and ... they uncovered something.”

Jessica thought she might vomit. She'd heard about these kinds of moments. One minute you're living your life, caught up in the trite little everyday stresses, the next you're blindsided by a full-blown crisis.

She started fossicking in her handbag.

“I'm afraid that what I have to tell you is quite upsetting,” the detective was saying. “There's really no way to sugarcoat it...”

Jessica's fingers wrapped around the bottle of pills she'd tucked into the secret side pocket of her bag. With two Valiums in her hand, she reached for her bottle of water. *Thank goodness*, she thought, *for Mrs. Montgomery-Squires.*

“What did you find?” she asked the detective.