



# THE WHISPERS

A NOVEL

ASHLEY  
AUDRAIN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF THE PUSH

ALSO BY ASHLEY AUDRAIN

*The Push*

The  
Whispers



Ashley Audrain

PAMELA DORMAN BOOKS

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*For every mom hanging on by a thread. And for those  
trying desperately to be one.*



What I increasingly felt, in marriage and in motherhood, was that to live as a woman and to live as a feminist were two different and possibly irreconcilable things.

—Rachel Cusk, in an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, 2012

He lifts two fingers to his nose and smells the child's mother as his eyes grow wide in the dark of his kitchen. The clock on the oven reads 11:56 p.m. His chest. Everything feels tight. Is he having a heart attack? Is this how a heart attack feels? He must move. He paces the white-oak hardwood and touches things, the lever on the toaster; the stainless-steel handle of the fridge; the softening, fragrant bananas in the fruit bowl. He is looking for familiarity to ground him. To bring him back.

A shower. He should shower. He scales the stairs like a toddler.

He refuses to look at himself in the bathroom mirror.

His skin stings. He scrubs.

He thinks he hears sirens. Are those sirens?

He wrenches the shower handle and listens. Nothing.

Bed, he should be in bed. That's where he would be if nothing had happened. If this was just another Wednesday night in June. He dries himself and places the towel on the door's hook where it always hangs. He fiddles with the way the white terry cloth falls, perfecting the ripple in the fabric like he's staging a department store display, his hands twitching with an unfamiliar fear.

His phone. He creeps through the dark house looking for where he's put it—the hallway bench, the kitchen counter, the table near the foot of the stairs. His coat pocket, that's where it is, on the floor at the back door, where he'd dropped it when he came into the house. He brings the phone upstairs, his legs still feeble, and stops outside their bedroom door.

He can't be in there.

He'll sleep in the spare room. He lies down slowly on the double bed, noting the care with which the linens have been smoothed and tucked, and places the phone beside him. He has an aching urge to call her.

What would he say? That he misses her? That he needs her?  
It's too late.

But he stares at the phone anyway, imagining himself hearing the steady march of the ringtone while he waits for her to pick up. And then he closes his eyes and sees the child again.

Sometime later he feels the mattress tremble. Someone has joined him. He waits to be touched. But no, it's a vibration. And then again. And then again. There's a streak of tangerine light piercing through the room. He swipes his thumb across the reflection of his bleary face on the phone's screen to answer.

The pained pitch of her voice. He has heard it before.  
"Something terrible happened," she says.

## SEPTEMBER

### *The Loverlys' Backyard*

There is something animalistic about the way the middle-aged adults size each other up while feigning friendliness in the backyard of the most expensive house on the street. The crowd drifts toward the most attractive ones. They are there for a neighborly family afternoon, for the children, who play a parallel kind of game, but the men have chosen nice shoes, and the women wear accessories that don't make it to the playground, and the tone of everyone's voice is polished.

The party is catered. There are large steel tubs with icy craft beer and bite-size burgers on long wooden platters and paper cones overflowing with shoestring fries. There are loot bags with cookies iced in each child's name, the cellophane tied with thick satin ribbon.

The back fence is lined with a strip of mature trees, newly planted, lifted and placed by a crane. There's no sign of the unpleasant back alley they abut, the dwellers from the rehab housing units four blocks away, the sewers that overflow in the rain. The grass is an admirable shade of green. There's an irrigation system. The polished concrete patio off the kitchen is anchored with carefully arranged planters of boxwood. There is a shed that isn't really a shed—its door pivots, there's a proper light fixture.

Three children belong to this backyard, to the towering three-story home that has been built on the double lot, unheard-of in an urban neighborhood like this. The three-year-old twins, a boy and a girl, are in matching seersucker, and they've let the mother of this audacious house style their hair nicely, swept, patted. The older boy, ten, insists

on wearing last year's phys ed uniform with a stain on the T-shirt. Hot chocolate or blood, the guests will wonder. But Whitney's husband had convinced her to pick her battles wisely in the fifteen minutes before the party begins.

By three thirty in the afternoon, she has let go of the urge to rip the gym shirt off him, to wrestle him into the powder-blue polo she bought for the occasion. She has let go of the hosting stress and feels the satisfying high of everyone enjoying themselves. She has impressed them all enough. She can tell from the glances, the subtle pointing between friends who notice the details she hopes they will. She thinks of the photos that will smatter social media tonight. The hum is loud and peppered with laughter, and this air of conviviality satiates her.

• • •

This noise is the reason Mara, next door, doesn't come. She got the heavy-cardstock invitation in her mailbox the month prior, like everyone else, and slipped it straight into the recycling bin. She knows these neighbors don't really want people like her and Albert there. They think she's got nothing to offer anymore. Her decades of wisdom don't matter in the least to those women, who march around like they've got it all figured out. But that's fine. She can see and hear everything she needs to through the slats in the fence, while she tidies her own garden, plucks at the tips of new weeds until her lower back is too sore, then she'll move to the mildewed patio chair. She notices something in the crispy-petaled branches of her hydrangea bush. She gives it a shake. A paper airplane falls nose first into the dirt. Another one she's missed. She found several in her yard Thursday morning. She bends to collect it as she hears Whitney's voice crest above the guests, greeting the couple from across the street.

• • •

**T**hat couple, Rebecca and Ben, make a point of finding the host as soon as they arrive. They've got twenty minutes and a potted orchid to give her. Rebecca has to get to work. Ben has Rebecca to appease, or he'd have stayed home. He is quiet while Rebecca and Whitney exchange pleasantries. Whitney compliments and inquires, she paws Rebecca's hand and then her shoulder, and Rebecca concedes. She is charmed in a way she isn't usually. She hopes nobody interrupts.

Ben's hair is still damp from the shower, and he smells like the morning. He feels Whitney glance at him while she speaks to his wife. His hand is in the back pocket of Rebecca's white jeans. He pulls her closer. Rebecca can sense that he isn't listening to her conversation with Whitney, not really, and she is right. He is watching the magician twirl a colorful scarf around one of Whitney's giggling twins, the girl, she has found Ben's friendly eyes. He's not overly social with other adults, but the children are always drawn to him. He is the favorite teacher. He is the playful uncle. He is the baseball coach.

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**F**rom across the yard, Blair watches as Ben and Rebecca find subtle ways to touch while they listen to Whitney orate, like they still find in each other every last thing they need. They are childless, child-free, and so they have not yet been irrevocably changed, not like the rest of them. They speak to each other in fully composed sentences with civilized inflection. They probably still fuck once a day and enjoy it. Fall asleep in the same bed with their limbs tucked into each other's crevices. Without a pillow wedged between them to separate her side of the bed from his, to imagine the other isn't there.

Blair watches her best friend, Whitney, begin to drift as she wraps with Rebecca, in subtle search of her next conversation. Aiden, the loud man who sleeps on the other side of Blair's barrier pillow, booms from the corner of the backyard. He has an audience, always an audience. He is building to a punch line she has heard before, he has caught Whitney's attention as she passes, and Blair is painfully aware she is standing by herself. She looks for Jacob, Whitney's husband, whom she spots with a couple she hasn't met. A toddler with tight braids wedges herself between the mother's legs. Jacob is gesturing to his house, drawing the shape of the roof with his finger, explaining a part of the design. He's wearing his signature black T-shirt and black chinos rolled at the cuff, he is sockless in crisp white designer sneakers, his hair, his brows, the rims of his Scandinavian eyewear, it's all intense and cool, but he's so gentle. He lifts a hand in Blair's direction, hello. She blushes, she has been staring. He is easy to stare at. Her eyes search again for his wife.

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Whitney is speaking now to a group of mothers from her older son, Xavier's grade. They have a group chat that Whitney rarely responds to, because she doesn't know the answers to the questions they ask about the first-term project and the hot lunch menu and the deadline for ordering class photos. But she likes being in the group chat anyway. Sometimes she chimes in with an emoji, as she arrives at the office early in the morning to her third cup of hot coffee and the pleasure of silence and thought. Thumbs up. Red heart. Thanks for the updates! Nothing helpful, slightly mocking. Whitney can feel the women's attention follow her now as she makes her way to say hello to their husbands, who stop their conversation, straighten their backs as they greet her.

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**B**lair catches Rebecca's attention instead, and it's their turn for the pleasantries now. Blair can think only of the weather, always the goddamn weather, how early the evenings grow cool now, and then Rebecca's grueling hours at the hospital, where she's due in forty-five minutes. But Rebecca loves those grueling hours. The two women have nothing in common but their proximity. Rebecca offers herself to Blair as an on-demand medical encyclopedia, answering every text she sends about her daughter's new rash or barking cough or itchy eardrum or grayish-colored poop. The kinds of things that can occupy Blair for days. Blair wonders how it feels to be so purposeful. To wear white denim to a family barbecue.

• • •

**R**ebecca's eyes fall every few seconds to Blair's seven-year-old daughter. She can't stop looking at her. Wondering what it would be like to be here with her own. She lets herself run with this version of her future and it gets longer and longer and longer, like the scarf from the magician's hat. The girl is drawing in chalk on the patio concrete with the twins, who are waiting for their turn with the rabbit. The two women watch Blair's daughter together now, each pretending to be more amused by the children than they are.

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**W**hitney joins them, her drink refreshed, and Blair and Rebecca come alive. She drapes her hand on Blair's shoulder and pretends not to be annoyed by the chalky colors covering the twins' palms. How sweet they are together, Whitney drawls, how good Chloe is with the littlest ones. She takes an inconspicuous step back, in fear of powdered handprints on her dress.

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Rebecca tries to imagine what it's like to be interested in doing this kind of thing, the hosting, the display. She has three minutes left and her brain will tick through all one hundred and eighty seconds because that is what it does. She, too, comments on Chloe's good nature while the seconds tally.

"Delightful" is the word Rebecca uses. Blair smiles, downplays her only child's perfection, but she is buoyed in the way only this kind of comment can achieve. As perfunctory as it might be.

The word "delightful" makes Whitney wonder where her undelightful son is. She can't see him in the backyard. Blair said she last saw him a half hour ago, standing at Mara's fence with his face between the slats. He is never where he is supposed to be. Whitney has warned him to be on his best behavior, to entertain the smaller children, to be friendly. Just this once. Just for her. He should be out here. The magician is nearly done.

Maybe he just needs a moment alone. Blair says this slowly, quietly, wondering if she shouldn't.

• • •

But no. Whitney will find him.

Can't he just do what she asked him to? Can't he be more like Blair's daughter? She thinks of his perpetual pouting, of how it borders on a scowl, people asking why he's in a grumpy mood when it's just the way he looks. Long faced. Morose. In need of a haircut he won't agree to. She moves quickly through the house calling his name. The pantry. The living room. The basement playroom. She shouldn't have to do this in the middle of a party with fifty-odd guests in the backyard. Is he hiding? Has he sneaked the iPad again? *Xavier!* Must he always push her buttons like this? She hurries to the third floor and opens the door to his room, and he is there, on his bed, with the stolen loot bags for the children emptied around him. Every last one. There is chocolate on his face and on the sheets. He

is licking the icing from a cookie wrapper stickered with another child's name.

“XAVIER! WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?” She swoops to rip the licked cellophane from his hands as he shrieks and recoils from her. “WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?”

Xavier's face crumples and his bottom lip curls down like that of a child half his age, and she will not allow the irritating whine that will crescendo next, the whine that makes her want to smack him. “NO!” she shouts, grabbing him by the arm as he whimpers and goes limp. She cannot stand him like this. “GET UP, YOU LITTLE SHIT!”

But then she lets go. Because she realizes the jovial purr below has deadened.

The party has gone silent. There is only the thump of her furious heart in her ears. And the ringing of her own venomous, murderous yelling. The familiar echo of her rage. The fear of possibilities registers. And then she notices. The wide-open window. Everyone has heard.

The shame pulls her to the ground. To the nest of discarded satin ribbons from the cookies, the ends cut like the tip of a snake's tongue.

She knows then what she has lost.

NINE MONTHS LATER

