
THE
BURNING
LAURA
BATES
SIMON & SCHUSTER

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CHAPTER 1

Hairbrush. Tampons. Toothbrush. Toothpaste.

The front door opens with a shudder and an ominous creak. Dark blue paint cracks and peels above a tarnished brass knocker.

Deodorant. Watch. Shoes.

'Come on,' Mum pants, heaving two bulging suitcases over the threshold and into the dark hallway.

I'm a list-maker. Lists give me grip. You can hold onto a list. Doesn't matter what's on it. Today it's everything I had to remember to pack at the last minute. The things I couldn't put in the car last night because I'd need them this morning.

The list has been helping me to breathe. Like a spell to ward off evil. I've been chanting it under my breath since I woke up and I haven't been able to stop. Because, as long as I keep repeating the things I need to remember, somehow I can distract myself. Pretend that I'm not really walking out of my bedroom for the last time. Not really stepping into a car loaded with everything we own. Not really driving past the park where I fell off my bike for the first time. Not watching

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the swimming pool where I trained three nights a week disappear in the rear-view mirror.

Hairbrush.

Passing the chippy.

Tampons.

The library.

Toothbrush.

The pet shop where I bought my ill-fated iguana. RIP, Iggy Poppet.

Toothpaste.

But now we're here. And even the list isn't powerful enough to blot out the new house in front of me.

I hesitate. Somehow, stepping through the door will make it real. I look back to the car, parked a little way down the street, its doors standing open, more luggage and overstuffed bin bags threatening to spill out. Through the back window, I can see a tatty box labelled ANNA'S ROOM: DIARIES, PHOTOGRAPHS, DAD'S BOOKS.

Nothing left to go back to anyway. I take a deep breath, adjust the bulky cat carrier under my arm and step inside.

The hallway has a musty smell, its whitewashed walls and wooden ceiling beams lit by one naked bulb. The removal van which whisked away most of our earthly belongings the night before we left has arrived before us and piles of labelled boxes teeter precariously on all sides. Mum's already bustling through into the big, airy kitchen, which also serves as the living room. There's one of those big Aga cookers radiating warmth and our new brick-red sofa, still covered in protective plastic sheets.

A massive old fireplace dominates the room, empty but framed by a handsome wooden mantelpiece. I empty my pockets, shoving my journey rubbish on top of it. Soggy Costa cup. Crumpled crisp packet. Half a Mars bar. It looks a bit less imposing now.

Gently, I set down the cat carrier and one very grumpy black cat unfurls out of it like a puff of smoke, letting out an indignant yowl to tell me exactly what he thinks of being cooped up in the car for so long.

'Sorry, Cosmo,' I whisper. I bend down to ruffle his soft fur with my fingertips, craving the comfort of his familiar warmth, but he turns tail with an angry hiss and disappears through the kitchen window into the back garden. I sort of wish I could follow him.

I shrug off my jacket and half slump onto the crackling, plastic-covered sofa. 'Don't even think about it!' Mum warns. 'We've got hours of unpacking ahead of us and the car's not even empty yet.'

Suddenly the trees outside shake with a gust of wind, causing an eerie, shrieking moan that sounds like it came from the bones of the house itself.

I try to sound sarcastic instead of freaked out. 'Are you sure this place is fit for human habitation?'

We only looked round the house once on a rushed, blustery weekend at the end of March, driving up from home and haring round Scotland in a whirl, viewing five or six different properties a day, each less inspiring than the last. At the last minute, we squeezed in an extra stop in a tiny fishing village called St Monans, where Mum instantly fell in love with the

quaint, crooked streets and peaceful old harbour lined with pastel-coloured cottages.

The cottage was one of those looking right out over the water, a neat, cream, square front snuggled cosily among the blues and yellows and pinks. Four sturdy wooden windows gave it a welcoming, symmetrical expression and a bright red roof peeped down from above, a few of the tiles higgledy-piggledy as if they'd been knocked awry by clumsy seagulls. I could tell Mum was smitten before we'd even stepped inside, but Linda, the estate agent, clearly still thought she had to convince us.

'It's historical!' she said brightly, through a lipstick smile, as she struggled to force open the sticking front door.

Upstairs we had to duck under sloping ceilings and I practically twisted an ankle tripping over the uneven floorboards.

'Imperfections add such a sense of personality to a house, don't they?' Linda trilled, rushing onto the next room without waiting for an answer while I rubbed my ankle crossly. I'd happily have traded a bit less 'personality' for a bit more health and safety, thank you very much.

I shiver and look up the winding staircase, remembering how I traipsed upstairs after Mum that day, bored and fed up.

We whizzed through three bedrooms, one looking out over a jungly back garden and the other two tucked under the front eaves of the house, with views across the street and down towards the harbour, where a few brightly painted fishing boats bobbed on the tide. The bathroom offered a dripping tap and a green stain around the plughole. The ceiling beams

were riddled with tiny woodworm holes and even the large stones around the doorways were scattered with deep, uneven scratches. ('Witches' marks! Don't they add a lovely touch of character?')

The house was chilly and several of the walls were flecked with mildew. (Still there, I notice, casting a critical eye over the paintwork in the hall.)

We didn't have time to look in the attic, which Linda airily assured us was both 'spacious' and 'cosy'. Call me cynical, but this made me suspect it might be neither. ('The last owners never touched it and it was used for storage before they arrived, so it might need just a *teensy* bit of a tidy out, but rest assured there's plenty of room up there.')

We'd been in a mad rush to move in two weeks, though, and, as Mum had pointed out over a plate of limp chips in the service station on the drive home, beggars can't be choosers. 'Got to get you settled in time for the start of the new school term,' she said, with a smile that was just a little too wide. 'It'll only be a half-hour drive into St Andrews for school and I can drop you off on my way to work.'

Two weeks later, here we are.

The front door bangs in the wind and I hurry out to help unload the car. As we heave the last few boxes into the hall, the sky begins to rumble and the first drops of rain splatter on the pavement. Mum slams the door shut and puts an arm round my shoulders. She smells of Daz and vanilla essence. I breathe in her smell as deeply as I can, clinging to its familiarity. 'It'll soon feel like home, love,' she says with a reassuring squeeze.