SARAH WISHART

FOUR *good* LIARS



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

First published in the United Kingdom by
HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2023
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*
Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper
Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland

1

Text copyright © Sarah Harris 2023
Cover illustrations copyright © Adams Carvalho 2023
Cover design copyright © HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2023
All rights reserved

ISBN 978–0–00–864195–5

Sarah Harris asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of the work.
A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Typeset in Times New Roman by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in the UK using 100% renewable electricity
at CPI Group (UK) Ltd

Conditions of Sale
This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form, binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without
the prior permission of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd.



This book is produced from independently certified FSC™ paper
to ensure responsible forest management.

For more information visit: www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

For Darren, James and Luke, with love

TUESDAY, 1 OCTOBER, 2.31 A.M.

'*Where's the money?*'

Donald Trump presses the gun to my forehead, ripping off the gag with a gloved hand. Holding my breath, I gaze up into the prosthetic mask. Vivid turquoise eyes stare back – contact lenses, right? It's part of the disguise, along with the voice distorter. In my peripheral vision, I catch another glimpse of blood pooling around my dead classmate. I shudder. The bindings bite deeper into my wrists. The weapon trains on the trembling person kneeling next to me in the cave. I try not to show any emotion; that's a sure way to get my head blown off next.

'Tell me where you've hidden it,' the tinny voice says.

A horrible choking noise rings out. The gun swerves in the direction of the muffled sobs. The question is repeated. Another gag removed. And another.

We're all in this together.

That's what the four of us agreed after the crash last week, but we all lied. Now only three of us are left. Who will break first?

'No one?' the metallic voice demands. 'Okay, have it your way. Let's play a game.'

My heart hammers against my ribcage as the gun swings towards me.

'Truth or dare.'

'W-w-what?'

'Don't make me repeat myself.'

'Fine . . . Dare . . . No, truth. I want to tell the truth. I've always wanted to – from day one. It was the others . . .' The words die on my lips. *Yet another lie.*

'Let's start with an easy one. Which school do you go to?'

A sigh of relief escapes from my lips. 'Kingsborough High School.'

'Wrong answer. Dead kids don't go to school.'

The masked figure pulls the trigger.

1

MONDAY, 23 SEPTEMBER, 7.29 A.M.

LAYLA

I'm not a thief! I've never stolen anything in my life.

My hands tremble with anger as I spray my hair with a ton of dry shampoo in the bathroom mirror; I didn't have time to wash it. I slept through my alarm after *finally* falling asleep around 4 a.m. I'd lain in bed replaying that awful scene in my head when Mrs Cavendish had accused me of stealing a ring from a guest's room. Someone supposedly saw me going into the hotel suite on Saturday. What a lie! I told Mrs C they were either mistaken or deliberately framing me.

But she wouldn't listen. She fired me on the spot.

Be grateful I haven't rung the police.

Before I'd headed to the sea tractor in tears, Rachel, one of the full-time housekeepers gave me a hug and insisted she believed me. She told me jewellery, money and a silver

leopard ornament have disappeared from rooms in the Sea Haven over the last few months. Mrs C was looking for a scapegoat – she'd smoothed things over with the old lady by sacking *someone* over her missing ring, but she didn't want the police turning up again. She'd claimed a dead drunken guest had been bad enough for business this season.

Still, why me?

Mrs C hasn't said anything outright racist, but she never attempted to pronounce my surname, Abdullatif, correctly and thought it was hilarious to call me Q. L. short for Queen Latifah on the rota. Of course, all the staff born and brought up in north Devon miraculously escaped her witch hunt. Mrs C hadn't even punished the estate manager for forgetting to restore the DANGER sign on the clifftop behind the hotel where that guest fell to his death.

'Hurry! It's half past,' Mum hollers up the stairs.

'I'm coming!'

I can't tell her what's happened – her worry list is full. I'll pretend I quit my Saturday job after getting sick of cleaning toilets. That part of my story is true. I've texted Frankie, the Lobster Bar's manager, and she's agreed to a trial waitress shift on Saturday night. I can shadow Liam – the brainiest student in my maths class and the entire school. Probably the whole of Devon.

‘Layla!’ This time it’s my stepdad Leon. ‘The bus won’t wait for you!’

Tell me about it.

Silas the Sadist closes the bus doors and pulls away to make me run whenever he spots me in his wing mirror. I regularly do the walk of shame to my usual seat, three rows from the front while the other kids slow-clap, the ones who are awake anyway.

‘I’m almost there!’

I head to my bedroom, past Salih’s door. I peer inside – the floor is a Lego death trap as usual, deliberately designed to cause maximum pain to bare feet while posters of famous footballers plaster every wall. His head rests on the pillow – bald, where once there were dark brown curls. I pause, listening for his breath, but he’s completely silent. I pick my way around tiny bricks and lean over the bed, frantically scanning his mouth and chest for movement.

Suddenly he sits bolt upright.

‘Get out before I throw something at you!’

I jump guiltily. ‘Sorry, *habibi*! Do you want anything?’

‘A less annoying sister? And I’m not *your darling*!’

I retreat, limping as a tile maliciously clamps to my heel. ‘Okay, I’m outta here.’

‘And close the door behind you, MM!’

I hate that nickname – it's short for Mini Mum – but I leave the door open a crack before hurrying downstairs.

'Don't forget to arrive early tonight to bag a good seat,' I tell Mum as I sling my rucksack next to the washing machine. I leave the tickets on the table as she and Leon peer at a message on her phone. I stick bread into the toaster and put water, ground coffee and sugar into the kanaka. I'll never survive maths first period without caffeine.

I place the long-handled pot on the hot plate and check my mobile as I wait for the mixture to heat up and froth. My friend Alvita has messaged:

Don't miss the bus. Save a seat for Kai!

She's attached a GIF of two teddy bears kissing. I reply with a blushing emoji. I should never have admitted I fancy him. She'll keep bugging me to flirt on the way to school. Luckily Alvita gets on after him, at the biggest pick-up point, and he'll be sat down already. I need to get a move on. There's only one morning bus for kids who can't get lifts. I've zero chance of Mum or Leon dropping me off, and I can't start driving lessons until I turn seventeen in January.

I pull the pot off the heat as the foam rises and put it back,

the way Baba – Dad – taught me. I glance at Mum and Leon but they're glued to her phone.

'Did you hear me? The concert starts at five but the doors open from four thirty.' I peer into the toaster – it works okay for everyone else, but I must have crossed it in a previous life. It always cremates my bread with its malevolent death rays.

'What's that?' Mum looks at me blankly. She has dark shadows under her eyes – another disturbed night as she checks on Salih every few hours. She brushes back a tendril of chestnut-coloured hair that falls loose from her unwashed ponytail.

'Is something on the calendar?' Leon chips in.

'Hello? My choir concert – we're performing songs from *The Greatest Showman*.'

'Has that come round already?' Mum asks, frowning.

They've forgotten! Ever since Salih was diagnosed with neuroblastoma seven months ago, he's come first, which is only right. We've all had to give up things, make sacrifices. But scraping into second place . . . well, it hurts sometimes.

Mum tuts as she scours the dates on the fridge door. 'I *did* write it down. I got caught up in Salih's trial – it slipped my mind to find a babysitter – sorry.'

'It's okay.' I fight to keep the disappointment out of my

voice. This experimental US medical trial is all Mum and Leon can think about since they applied last month.

'I'm on the back row. You wouldn't see much of me anyway.'

'I thought you were one of the soloists?' Leon asks.

I shrug. 'I didn't get the song I wanted.'

That's a lie, but they don't need to know the truth. Mr Grange relegated me to chorus after I missed too many rehearsals. He'd switched the sessions from lunchtime to 4 p.m. and I hadn't wanted to bother Mum and Leon about late pick-ups. I'm also supposed to attend after-school homework club to catch up with my music and drama assignments. Lack of sleep is wrecking my concentration. I jiggle the toaster before turning it off at the wall and stabbing a knife inside. My bread is being incinerated. Smoke drifts out as I free the smouldering black slabs. I drop them into the bin and turn to the kanaka. The coffee's boiling over. Seriously I give up.

'No, Layla, it's not okay!'

I spin round as Mum covers her face with her hands, her shoulders slumped. Leon puts his arms round her. I'm a horrible selfish person. I wish I'd never mentioned the concert. It's probably best they don't come. I don't want them to bump into Mrs C – her daughter, Fliss Cavendish, is one of

the soloists. Wait, did Fliss get me sacked so she could spread fake news around the sixth form? I wouldn't put it past her.

'It doesn't matter, honestly!'

Mum shakes her head, wiping her eyes with her sleeve.

'What is it? What's going on?'

'The doctor in the US has emailed about the trial,' Leon says quietly.

A tiny dagger stabs my heart. 'He won't take Salih?'

'No, your brother's been accepted.' Leon's eyes mist up. 'We could fly out and begin treatment straight away.'

'I d-d-don't understand. That's great . . . right?' I scan their faces. They look anything but happy. 'This will make Salih better. You said the treatment was experimental, but it could get rid of his cancer for good.'

'You're right,' Mum says. 'It's his only—'

'Sandy!' Leon interjects.

'I mean . . . this is Salih's *best* chance of getting well.'

I inhale sharply as her meaning sinks in. This is Salih's *only* chance of recovering from his cancer – a rare but aggressive one. I catch hold of the worktop as the room spins. At his last hospital appointment the doctor said he was *responding well to treatment*. Mum and Leon had hugged and performed a goofy dance around his bed. But as I look at their stricken faces now, I realise I've been dumb. The

tumour is still there. It could grow, spread, like Baba's lung cancer. He died a year after his diagnosis, shortly after Salih's third birthday.

'What's the problem?'

I bite my bottom lip as Mum stares at a stack of bank statements and unpaid bills on the table.

'How much do we need?' I pause, doing a quick calculation in my head. 'I can help out – I've saved about four hundred pounds.' If I land this waitressing gig, I could beg Frankie for weekday shifts as well as weekends.

'Layla, it's two hundred and fifty thousand dollars,' Leon says quietly.

My knees weaken. Icy fingers crawl up my spine. He may as well have said £2 million. Mum looks after Salih 24/7 and Leon's back injury has ruled out building work. He's only found a part-time delivery driver position since we moved to Sandstown, a village outside Kingsborough, nine months ago.

'What are we going to do?' My voice falters.

'That's not your problem. We'll think of something.' Leon frowns. 'I'll plead with the bank for a loan. Perhaps my parents could remortgage and—'

'I'm setting up a JustGiving page today,' Mum cuts in. 'And I'll ask your grandma for help.'

I raise an eyebrow. Teta stopped talking to Mum when she married Leon three years ago and she rings me to get updates on Salih. Before retiring, she used to own a ful medames shop in Cairo, which was successful and served scores of hungry customers a day, but she's never been mega wealthy.

'I'm sure lots of people will want to chip in when they hear how –' Mum's voice wobbles horribly – 'how important this is.' She means *vital*, *lifesaving*.

They both attempt fake smiles, but they won't earn Oscars for their acting skills. The pain in my chest grows sharper, pincers grinding deeper and deeper into my flesh.

I open my mouth to speak, but Leon thrusts my rucksack and coat into my hands, steering me into the hall. 'Silas will go without you!'

He manoeuvres me out of the front door and shuts it behind me before I can protest. I don't know how I'm making it down the hill; my legs feel like leaden weights. I'm half walking, half lurching to the bus stop, my stomach churning queasily.

If we don't find a way to come up with $250,000 my super-irritating, funny, football-loving little brother could die.

I can't let that happen.

I'll do absolutely anything to save him.