

J. Cade Keith

Betsy Webster

An excerpt



WHEN THE DRIVER pulls up in front of the Big House, Betsy is thrilled to see no other cars parked around the circle. All six dogs come bounding around the corner to greet her, happy and expectant—Delilah, Ariadne, Clarissa, Galileo, Aristotle, and Popeye, the German Shepherd—followed by Freddy who also knows the sound of Betsy’s car.

‘Hello, Ms. Webster. Welcome home.’

‘Hello, Freddy. It seems nice and quiet here.’

‘Yes, Ma’am. It is. Everyone is gone except Ms. Berkshire, down at the Beach House.’

‘Is Molly here?’

‘No. She was here for a short while this morning and left.’

‘No one else? What about the construction crew?’

‘No. Mr. Moss sent them all home yesterday.’

‘And what about Mr. Moss?’

‘Mr. Moss stayed here last night and left after Mr. Finnegan arrived. Mr. Finnegan took a look around and left about nine.’

‘Thank you, Freddy. Everything else is good?’

‘Just fine, Ma’am. Back to normal.’

‘Excellent. Glad to hear it.’

‘Is there anything you’ll be needing from me today, Ms. Webster?’

'I suppose we should do a walk-through together, just to see what's what after the crowd we've had here. I'll come find you later this afternoon, will that work?'

'Of course. I'll look for you then.'

'Thank you, Freddy.'

Betsy lets the dogs in and slowly closes the door behind her, the satisfying click of the latch loud in the silent foyer. She turns and stands very still, closing her eyes. The quiet lifts her heart. Even the dogs seem to understand, scattered around her like handmaidens in waiting. She walks into the living room, revelling in the click of her heels on the hardwood floor echoing throughout the house. The early afternoon sun cuts triangles of light and shadow in the air, celebrating the open space—spotless, ordered, elegant, serene.

Clarissa and Ariadne pad along behind her as she visits each room on the ground floor, finding the same tranquil hush everywhere. She climbs the stairs. Every bedroom, every bath freshly cleaned and perfect. The attic, empty. The basement rid of all hints of recent activities. Back upstairs and out on the veranda, Betsy surveys her gardens. Magnificent. Not a shred of evidence remains of that hideous pink monstrosity. She breathes in the heady mixture of sweetness and salt in the air. The lawns are green, the meadow lush. She can hear the rhythmic rumble of the breakers on the rocks below carried on the wings of an offshore breeze.

Back in the kitchen, Betsy finds a short note from Molly. She has done the shopping and put in the usual provisions. There is dinner for two in the refrigerator. Good. Betsy won't be needing a regular cook the way she has been, but Molly will survive. Time to head down to the Beach House and find out what Carol's been up to. For the three days she's been away, they haven't spoken on the phone once. Not that that is so unusual. Carol is hopeless on the phone, and Betsy has never been one for idle chatter. Heading down through the tall grass beyond the cut lawn, Betsy wonders what it might be like to anticipate finding someone else in her house. What about David? A year ago she would have laughed at the thought of coming home to a man. But now? Betsy picks up a faded tennis ball by the side of the path and throws it out into the field for the dogs to chase. Brilliant, watching them run and play, so happy together. People should be like that.

Betsy walks in the front door, heads to the bedroom and drops her carryall on the luggage rack. She can hear Carol through the open bathroom door singing in the shower. Natasha Bedingfield, *Feel the Rain on My Skin*.

She takes off her shoes and goes to the refrigerator for a bottle of Evian. Carol's laptop is on the dining room table. That's where she likes to write. Good. She's been working. The empty coffee cup and

full ashtray attest to that. There is also the mirror with the razor blade and the rolled up twenty dollar bill on the counter. That doesn't mean anything, one way or the other.

Just as Betsy decides to go join her lover in the shower, Carol's phone rings, lighting up and vibrating steadily towards the edge of the table. Instinctively, Betsy grabs the phone before it falls. The screen says 'Charley'. Curious. She answers.

'Hello. Carol's phone,' Betsy says.

"Oh! Hello. Who is this?"

'This is Betsy Webster. Who is this?'

'Oh...oh, hello, Betsy. This is Charley...from Anazari? How are you?'

Right. Charley.

'Oh! Hello, Charley! How are you? Where are you calling from?'

'Um...I'm great, Betsy. I'm actually in New York...'

'Great, Charley...Carol is in the shower. Can I take a message? Or have her call back?'

'Um, no message. Just ask her to call me when she gets a chance, thanks.'

'You're close by. Are we going to see you?' Betsy asks.

'Um...well...I'm not sure. That depends, I suppose...'

'Alright. Well, great to hear your voice, Charley. I'll let Carol know you called.'

'Thank you...well, good-bye then.'

'Yes. Good-bye.'

Betsy ends the call and sets the phone down on the table, thinking. She writes Charley's name on a Post-It Note from Carol's workspace with a black Sharpie and sticks it to the phone. That's all she needs to do.

Change of plan. Betsy walks into her wardrobe, strips off her traveling clothes, and slips into her bathing suit. Let Carol find her note in her own time. Betsy heads out the side door and down the Hundred Steps Stair through the pink and red rose hips to the dock. The tide is out. The primordial funk of muddy seaweed drying on the rocks permeates the salty air. She sees the sandy bottom crystal clear through the shallow yellowy-green water. Periwinkles cover the pylons and Betsy catches a glimpse of a large, black tautog circling under the walkway. A pair of pelicans skim the waves near the shore while further out a frenzied cloud of shorebirds pluck roiling menhaden driven to the surface by stripers underneath. Gleaming, white triangular sails dot the bay as a fleet of brightly colored spinnakers bears down on a racing mark near the mouth of the harbor down the coast. Sailing class, Betsy thinks, though she can't imagine why she would know such a thing.

Betsy executes a perfect racing dive off the float and lets her body glide. She rolls onto her back and floats under luminous cumulus clouds billowing in the azure sky.

Does David McClellan swim? Does he know how to dive? Does he love the water the way she does? Will she ever find out?

She turns and kicks quickly into her stroke. Down to the light buoy at the harbor head and back, forty minutes today in the current, all thinking left behind.

When she gets back to the pier, Betsy continues past the float to wade in the tidepools under the dock, feeling the goosh of the silty sand between her toes. Clarissa and Ariadne wait for her on the shore. She climbs the steep path up from the beach to the bathhouse where she takes a white towel from the box and drapes it over her shoulders. When she walks into the Beach House at the top of the stairs, Carol is in the kitchen wearing a kimono, spreading jam on a piece of toast.

'Hi! You're back!' Carol says happily.

'I am,' Betsy says, giving Carol a light kiss on the lips.

'Good trip? Have you seen the house? Completely cleaned out!'

'Yes, good trip, and, yes, I stopped there first to talk to Freddy and see for myself.'

'Pleased?'

'Yes. Relieved.'

Betsy takes a bottled water from the fridge.

'How has the writing been going? Enjoying your time alone?'

'Splendid. I finished my piece for Hanna. I think it came out well. I sent it to her yesterday afternoon and she emailed me this morning with edits, nothing too grim. I sent her back a second draft at one and haven't heard anything so that's good news, I suppose.'

'Anything else going on?'

'Nothing much, really.'

'Are you up for a game of tennis? I called Alexandra earlier. She's geared for doubles at five if we are. She suggested we clean up after and stay for drinks and dinner. How does that sound?'

'Sure. That sounds great. What can we do until then?' Carol asks, sliding over behind Betsy and slipping a hand around her waist. Betsy gives Carol another kiss on the lips.

'Not now, sweetheart,' she says with a smile. 'I want to go up to the Big House and look things over with Freddy. You get ready. I'll call Alexandra and tell her we're on.'



Betsy and Carol take the first set handily before Alexandra and Becca come back and win the second, six-five. No one wants to leave it a tie, so by the time Alexandra nets Carol's volley at seven-eight in the third to end the match, it is a quarter past seven. The four women shower and change at the clubhouse and are soon joined by Alexandra and Becca's husbands, Vince and Spencer, for drinks on the terrace as they wait for dinner.

'Well, here we are!' says Vince jovially, sitting down next to Alexandra on the white wicker sofa. 'What is the topic of conversation for this evening?'

'Well, what I want to know is what's going on with Betsy's art and science project,' Becca says. 'Alexandra tells me you're scrapping it! That can't be right! How can that be? You put so much into it. Time, and a lot of money as well, I expect.'

'I haven't exactly scrapped it. I've put it on hold, for the time being.'

'For how long?'

'Indefinitely.'

'Really, Betsy! Why? You were so gung-ho! Such an undertaking! We all thought it was all very exciting!' Spencer says.

'Yes! We were all so proud! So uplifting for the neighborhood!' Becca chimes in.

'Well, it *was* exciting. Still is, actually. It can easily be resurrected. The bones are still in place. We did the best we could to get the planning right, but some of the details weren't thought through properly, I suppose. We didn't get the residents' studios finished in time, so I had a half a dozen artists living in the house, which turned out to be something of a nightmare, to say the least.'

'We heard about the big pink dick in the middle of the garden,' adds Spencer. 'Hilarious! Did it really go up in flames? I wish I could have seen that!'

'It was quite something,' laughs Carol.

'Oh, Jesus. What a fucking night that was!' sighs Betsy.

'Oh, my God! I can only *imagine!*' Becca hoots. 'What was your take on it, Carol? Was it a total helter skelter, having all those artists running around?'

'Well, I'm not sure what helter skelter means,' Carol smirks. 'But, yes, it was a bit of a madhouse.'

'Helter Skelter? It's a song. By the Beatles. It means upside-down.' Spencer explains.

'Not to mention the Charlie Manson murders,' Vince adds.

'Oh. I don't know anything about that,' Carol says. 'Before my time, I suppose.'

'Carol, of course you know what Helter Skelter is!' Betsy says. '*The Girls!* You just finished the book! Emma Klein? That beautiful winery we visited in Sonoma? You remember!'

'Oh. Right. Of course.'

Becca picks up a different thread. 'Speaking of murders, though. I hate to be a downer, but has more come out about that horrible situation with that unfortunate boy who got run over last month? Such a terrible thing for you, Betsy! And that beautiful car! Wrecked!'

'Not much, I'm afraid.'

'Well, you know, the ugly truth of it is, seventy percent of all murders go unsolved,' Spencer states authoritatively.

'Seventy, Spence?' Alexandra asks.

'Well, I don't know. A lot, I'm sure. And, of course, if any of you saw the recent piece in The Times, the importance of the first forty-eight hours has been completely debunked. It's just about the number of detectives on the case. Allocation of resources.'

'It's actually sixty-one percent,' Betsy says, definitively. 'I looked it up recently. But you make excellent points, Spencer.'

'Well, we don't know it was actually a murder. Could have been just an accident, right?' Carol asks.

'Well, it was definitely a hit and run. That's vehicular homicide. Even if it was a deer, the driver should have stopped. Doesn't anybody just do the right thing anymore?' Alexandra is emphatic.

Becca persists. 'Really, Betsy? Nothing more? Frank Silva's pretty sharp. Nice guy, too.'

'I think Frank would have called me if he had any new information.'

'Do they have any suspects?' Vince pushes forward.

'You know, they asked me for a complete guest list from my party. You were all there. Did the police contact any of you?'

Everyone shakes their head no.

'No, I couldn't imagine they would. Although...get this! I spoke with my dear friend Mitch Crosse the other day—you know, *Senator* Mitch Crosse? Apparently, our vigilant Pearson's Bight Chief of Police called *him* last week and asked him about driving that car! Mitch phoned me immediately, wanting to know what was going on. He actually found it rather amusing—if you could imagine anyone finding a hit-and-run amusing. And then Chief Silva called *me* wanting to know if I could remember what Mitch was wearing that night, if you can believe that. Something about some fibers they found.'

'Of course! We all know Mitch! I spoke to him at the party,' Alexandra chimes in. 'I remember he was wearing an ascot. Quite dapper.'

'Yes. Well, Frank wanted to know how well I knew Mitch and if he had ever been around that car. Of course, I told Frank that Mitch is an old family friend, not some hit-and-run scoundrel. He's a *Senator*, for God's sake! Every time Mitch visits, he takes that car out. He loves that car.'

'Oh, right. A Senator. Like Senator Kennedy, Chappiquidick. They're so pure.' Becca softens her cynicism. 'The whole thing is terribly tragic. How *is* the car?'

Alexandra's cook Vanessa steps in to announce that dinner is served and the party moves to the table, bringing their cocktails with them. Braised ahi salad nicoise with pineapple aioli, plantain fritters and braised leeks. The conversation drifts off in other directions.

By the time Betsy and Carol pull into the driveway at the Beach House, it is well past ten-thirty.

'Do you want anything before we go to bed?' Carol asks Betsy from the kitchen.

'Water, please.'

Betsy wipes mascara from under her eyes.

'Already on it,' Carol says, setting down a glass on the vanity. 'Anything else?'

'No. That's good for me. Thank you, darling.'

Carol disappears back into the bedroom and returns with a small mirror and two neatly laid out lines of cocaine. She kneels down next to Betsy's chair.

'How about some of this?'

Betsy rubs moisturizer into her cheeks.

'No, not tonight, thank you. I'm pretty beat,' she says, working the cream under her chin.

'Oh, come on! That's just the point! For old times sake? Please? We used to do this all the time!'

'*You* used to do it all the time,' Betsy laughs. 'Your memory is going. You must be getting old.'

'Not so old.' Carol stands and hops on her toes. 'All right then, fine! All the more for me!' she says and takes the coke back into the bedroom.

'Don't overdo it!' Betsy calls after her.

Betsy hears Carol snort first one line and then the other.

'I'm fine!' Carol answers. 'Just don't take too long!'

'Do you need to get in here?' Betsy asks over her shoulder.

'In the morning! I'll do it then. Come to bed!'

Betsy splashes water on her face and pats dry. She carefully folds the washcloth in four, places it precisely on the table and mindfully brushes her hair back from her forehead. How much higher is her

hairline than the last time she looked? She thinks her eyebrows are thinning, her cheekbones sharper than they ought to be. Betsy reaches into the back of the top drawer and pulls out a pack of Players. There is a lighter in the box. She watches herself in the mirror as she lights a cigarette, takes a deep drag and exhales slowly through her nose. No! Dammit, that makes it all much worse. Disgusted with herself, she quickly stubs out the cigarette in the sink and tosses the butt in the trash. Nasty habit. What's going on tonight? When had she ever had to pump herself up to go to bed with Carol?

'If you don't get in here right now, I'm going to start without you!' Carol calls out impatiently from the other room.

'Why don't you?' Betsy says, standing in the doorway. 'I might like that tonight.'

'All right,' Carol purrs. 'Take a seat.' She throws back the sheets. 'Let's get this show on the road.'



When Betsy comes back from her swim the next morning, Carol is still in bed where she'd left her the night before. She makes herself a second cup of coffee and absentmindedly walks over to Carol's work table. The phone and her note about Charley are gone. She takes her coffee out onto the deck and sits down with her laptop to read the news and check her mail. Carol must have heard her come in.

'When did you get up, darling?' Carol gently touches the back of Betsy's neck. 'I reached for you at some point in the middle of the night and you weren't there.'

'Yes. I couldn't fall asleep. I ended up on the divan out here.'

'Wasn't it cold?'

'I grabbed a sleeping bag. I didn't want to wake you.'

'Oh... OK.'

Betsy turns and looks up at Carol, smiling. 'Don't be disappointed. It was a lovely evening. You were marvelous. I don't know what was going on. Too much to drink, maybe.'

'Or not enough.'

'Hardly.'

'Let me get some coffee and I'll join you.'

A few minutes later Carol is back, leaning on the railing.

'I saw you left that note about Charley calling,' Carol says, looking out at the water. 'Do I need to explain?'

'I don't know. Do you?'

'Well, I don't know. Do I? She called me, a few weeks ago, actually. She said she would be in town and wondered if we could get together.'

'I see. What did you tell her?'

'I said that would be nice.'

'Any mention of me?'

Carol looks down at the coffee cup in her hands.

'No.'

Betsy sits quietly watching Carol.

'Charley is...well, she's young, younger than me, anyway. I mean that in a good way,' Betsy teases.

Carol smiles and turns her head.

'Yes, she is young. Not that that has ever been an issue for me, obviously,' Carol grins.

Both women laugh.

'Well, did you call her back?'

'Not yet.'

'Why not?'

'I'm not sure. I think I wanted to bring you in on it, somehow. I guess I just didn't know how to do that.'

'Well, I'm in it now. What are your thoughts? What do you want to do?'

Carol's shoulders slump.

'I'm not sure. What do you want me to do?'

'I want you to be happy, Carol. I want you to love your life.'

Betsy pauses for a moment to consider. She continues, smiling.

'Yes. That's what I want. I want you to love your life.'

'But I *do* love my life! I love everything about my life! Especially you!'

'I know that, darling. And I love you too. But maybe it's time to branch out a bit. We've had a great run, don't you think?'

'I do! Of course I do.'

Carol moves over to Betsy's chair and kneels in front of her.

'You are all I've ever wanted.'

'Well, that has been true, some of the time, anyway.'

Carol smiles sweetly, brushing away a tear.

'You know what I mean.'

"Yes. Of course I know.'

'What does this mean for us?'

'It means...I think it means that you are going to go back to New York. You are going to call Charley and find out what that's all about. You are going to write your brilliant articles. And you are going to tell me all about it. And it means that I am going to be right there for you all the way.'

'And what about you?'

'Me? Well, for me, it means I am going to stay close to home now that it's all been cleared out. I also love my life. Simple as that.'