

the party

one invitation.

a lifetime of
regrets.



ROBYN HARDING

the
PARTY
ROBYN HARDING

a novel



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For Margaret Lilleyman

(1936–2012)

*The most voracious reader I have known
and the perfect mother-in-law for a writer.*

kim

THAT NIGHT

Kim should have heard it, would have heard it if she hadn't installed earplugs and taken half an Ambien. The girls were two floors below, but she'd anticipated giggling, music, a few late-night trips to raid the fridge. . . . To ensure a sound sleep, she'd nibbled a bit of the sedative, despite having had two glasses of white wine after dinner. She'd done it plenty of times without incident. She'd always been a light sleeper, and, lately, adequate rest had become imperative for Kim. There were too many hormones wreaking havoc with her humor. And there was far too much tension in her marriage to handle without a good night's sleep.

"Mom! Dad!" Kim dragged herself up from under the warm, wet blanket of sedation. It was Hannah's voice, tearful, close. . . . Kim opened heavy lids and saw her daughter at the end of the bed. Tall, pretty Hannah wearing a nightie that looked like a football jersey, the number 28 across her chest. It was Hannah's birthday today—sweet

sixteen—she was having a slumber party. So why was she here, in the small hours of the morning? Why was she crying? As Kim struggled for lucidity, she realized something was terribly wrong. Tears streamed down Hannah's face and there was something on her hands . . . something dark and wet, glistening in the faint glow of the LED clock radio . . .

Blood.

kim

THAT DAY

“Should we wake the princess?” The words hovered in the chill morning air, unanswered. Kim leaned her elbows on the custom butcher-block breakfast bar, took a sip of black coffee, and waited. When he finally responded, Jeff’s eyes never left his laptop screen.

“It’s her birthday. Let her sleep. . . .”

Kim glanced at the digital clock on the Miele gas range: 8:37 A.M., an unreasonable hour to ask a girl to rise on any Saturday, let alone her sixteenth birthday. Sixteen . . . God, where had the time gone? Kim allowed herself a brief moment of nostalgia, her mind slipping back to that dreary March day when Hannah was born. It seemed like yesterday and an eternity at the same time. That pink, squalling creature she had birthed with such effort was now tall, beautiful, undeniably womanly. . . . Kim was different now, too. Her physical transformation was less dramatic (at forty-six, she prided herself on being able to pass for forty,

maybe even thirty-nine—thanks to a strict regimen of Pilates, cold-pressed juices, and the judicious use of fillers), but she was not the same naive, hopeful woman she'd been that day. She had grown up, as surely as Hannah had.

Jeff's relentless tap-tap-tapping drew her out of her reverie: Silicon Valley keyboard torture. "Still working on that presentation?" A tinge of annoyance had crept into her tone, but it wasn't like Jeff noticed. He didn't seem to notice anything about his wife lately. Kim could have been doing a naked handstand on the back of a unicorn and Jeff would have kept pecking away at his keyboard like a chicken on Ritalin.

"Yep." He remained focused on his work, as if he was locked in his Palo Alto office on a Tuesday, not drinking coffee in his open-plan kitchen with his spouse on a Saturday morning. Jeff seemed to have forgotten that this was a day traditionally designated for leisure pursuits and family bonding. Not that Kim had any real desire to bond with her husband of eighteen years. After the *incident* last year, she found civility challenging, let alone quality time. But she couldn't help but feel neglected. And she envied her husband's single-minded obsession with providing financial software solutions to corporations, his unblinking belief that his job as VP of global strategy at Fin-Tech Solutions really meant something. In Jeff's mind, the infrastructure of the entire US economy would come crashing down without his constant attention.

"I'm going to do some work, too," she said, rising from the barstool.

The typing paused as Jeff headed for the coffeepot. "More coffee?"

"I'm fine. Call me when Aidan gets up. I'll make him some eggs."

"If he gets up. That kid could sleep for days."

"He's thirteen. He's growing."

Half a lukewarm cup of coffee in hand, Kim padded in slippered feet past the sunken living room, its expanse of windows affording spectacular views of the San Francisco Bay. Her office was at the back of the designer home, tucked between the laundry room and the wine cellar, a tidy, compact space allocated for her freelance copywriting job. "It's just to keep my foot in the door," she'd explained when Jeff told her his salary negated the need for her to work. "I might want to go back when the kids are older." At sixteen and thirteen, the kids officially qualified as *older*, and still, Kim made no move to return to her life in advertising. It was a young person's career, custom-designed for twentysomethings who had the freedom to work late, then go for after-work drinks that usually led to dark nightclubs and ultimately, some uninhibited but regrettable sex with a colleague. It was fun while it lasted, but those days were over for Kim. She'd replaced them with a hardworking husband; two tall, academically successful children; and a three-thousand-square-foot, mid-century modern remodeled home on Potrero Hill (the coveted North Slope, with panoramic views that raised property values by about a million bucks). She'd traded that stressful, stimulating, slightly debauched life for one of staid, domestic perfection. Most days, she had no regrets.

She sat in her ergonomic rolling chair and booted up the computer. As the screen magically illuminated, her stomach twisted

with a mixture of guilt and excitement. It was phenomenal, this box of technology that allowed her to sit less than twenty feet from her husband, in her robe and slippers, her hair unkempt and face free of makeup, and reach out to Tony on the other side of town. She opened Messenger and typed.

U working?

The juvenile shorthand made her feel young, giddy, like an eighth grader sending a note to a boy she was crushing on.

Pretending. U?

Her heart fluttered at his blatant admission.

Finishing some stuff.

It was a lie. Her “foot in the door” had dwindled to an ongoing contract with San Francisco’s third largest outdoor clothing retailer, to provide copy for their biweekly flier. The two-line descriptions of waterproof jackets and hiking boots consumed roughly seven hours a week, for which she was able to bill fifteen. But she wasn’t ready to admit that the sole reason she was in her office on a Saturday morning was to flirt with her designer, Tony. His message popped up on the screen.

What r u doing today?

Hannah’s b-day. Sweet 16

Happy b-day Hannah

The sentiment made Kim’s stomach twist again. Tony didn’t know Hannah, had no place wishing her a happy birthday. She had not invited him into her personal universe, had not introduced him to her husband and kids. Did Tony really expect Kim

to give his regards to her daughter, like some friendly fake uncle? It would have been inappropriate . . . and kind of creepy.

Tony and Kim met twice a month, legitimately, and had recently doubled that as their undefined connection grew. The nature of their relationship remained nebulous: there had been nothing lurid or inappropriate in their communications; a benign, teasing sort of flirtation (again, reminiscent of eighth graders) being the most incriminating aspect. When they met in person, physical contact was limited to a brief hug hello followed by a hand on a shoulder, or a playful punch in the arm as they shared a joke. It was a forced casualness, like two platonic pals, two college buddies, a brother and sister. . . . The only thing lewd about their relationship was the way Kim's heart would race when she heard his voice, received his messages, or spoke his name; how her cheeks and groin would burn with pleasant heat.

She could only assume Tony felt the same way, though at times, his actions gave her pause. Like wishing Hannah a happy birthday. In that three-word expression, he was acknowledging that Kim was a mother, a wife, a woman with a fully domesticated life outside of their relationship. She knew Tony had such a life, too, but she didn't like to think about it. She didn't want to know his kids' names (Declan and Ruby). She didn't want to know that his wife (Amanda) was a successful attorney who worked long hours, leaving Tony to pick up the kids from school, drive them to their extracurriculars, and cook dinner most nights—all while juggling his freelance design assignments. Kim preferred to think of Tony as an island.

Another message arrived from him.

Having a party?

A few girls for pizza and cake

Pizza and cake--LOL

???

They're 16. They'll sneak booze or boys in

This annoyed Kim. Tony didn't know Hannah. He wasn't qualified to lump her in with all the wanton sixteen-year-olds he saw in the media, caught taking pills, having babies in bathroom stalls, or drifting over the center line in her mom's station wagon and killing a family in a minivan. Kim took her job as a mother very seriously, and her children were evidence of that. She read parenting books. She attended workshops put on by the PTA. She knew the delicate balance between implementing boundaries and allowing children to spread their wings, between setting expectations and applying too much pressure. And she talked to her kids. She and Hannah had discussed all manner of teenaged transgressions, from cutting and marijuana to eating disorders and ecstasy. They had definitely discussed the dangers of binge drinking. (Fortuitously, her nephew in Oregon had gotten so drunk at a party that he'd pissed himself in front of his friends and had to spend a night in the hospital hooked up to an IV.) Obviously, she'd told Hannah that her sixteenth would be alcohol-free. Hannah had rolled her eyes—"Of course, Mom"—because she didn't drink anyway. Maybe Declan and Ruby would be typical rowdy teens, drinking and smoking and generally rebelling against a workaholic mother and a father who pretended to be designing fliers when he was really messaging with his female copywriter. But Kim's kids wouldn't. She was doing her job right. She typed:

GTG

Her irritation still simmering under the surface, she deleted the conversation and headed back to the kitchen. She found Tony attractive, charming, amusing . . . and his interest in her was flattering, particularly in light of her husband's lack of it. But Tony's comment reminded her that they really didn't know each other. They'd been working together for almost six months, but they'd never had a meaningful conversation about issues or values. They talked about work or they flirted like adolescents. She'd just signed off with *GTG* like some infatuated teenager too lazy to type *Got to go*. What was wrong with her?

When she entered the kitchen, Jeff didn't look up from his screen. "Done already?"

"There wasn't much left to do." She made her way to the coffeemaker. "You left the empty pot on the burner."

"You said you didn't want anymore."

"I don't. But that doesn't mean I want the coffeepot to crack. Or the house to burn down."

He looked away from his computer directly at her. "Why are you so crabby?"

"I'm not," she barked, belying her words. "I'm going to take a shower." She headed for the open staircase that led to the master suite.

"Do you need help getting ready for the party?"

She turned back, softening at the offer. It was a rare overture from Jeff, and it reminded her that they were still a team. No matter how far apart they drifted, no matter how much he had hurt her, they were stuck in this family together. She looked at his

sandy hair, mussed from sleep, at his stubbly face, still boyish despite his forty-eight years. Deep inside, Kim harbored a tiny kernel of hope that what they once had was salvageable. She suddenly regretted the ten minutes she'd spent secluded in her office with another man's messages.

"I promised Hannah I'd get her a flourless chocolate cake from that bakery on Cesar Chavez. We could walk there? I think the sun's trying to come out."

"Except I'm going for a swim and a run with Graham."

Her jaw clenched. "Forget it then."

His words followed her ascension up the stairs. "What? The triathlon's in August!"



BY 10:40 A.M., Kim's Audi wagon was chock-full of trans fat-free snack foods, diet sodas, veggie platters, and three bunches of fresh tulips in Hannah's favorite color, purple. Nestled in her Gucci purse was the rectangular box housing the tennis bracelet she and Jeff had decided to buy for their daughter. It had cost over five grand, but it was the girl's sixteenth, after all. And in their affluent world, the bar was high. Hannah had at least one friend who'd been given a car for her birthday. Of course, this friend's father had run off with his dental hygienist, so a fair amount of guilt factored into the purchase. Kim felt a diamond-and-white-gold bracelet showed love without being overindulgent.

Her last stop was Tout Sweet, a candy-colored bakeshop adored by Hannah and her friends. Its macarons, marshmallows, and meringues were so popular that locations were popping up

across the city, a sugary coup. She had just ordered her daughter's favorite cake when a voice said, "Kim?" She turned and was instantly swept into a hug. "God! How are you?"

It was Lisa, the mother of Hannah's friend Ronni. The women had been close once, when the girls were small and in each other's hip pockets. Maybe they weren't close—they were more *thrown together*, watching their daughters climb on rickety monkey bars, splash in urine-filled wading pools, and bounce in inflatable castles. When Lisa would pick up Ronni from a playdate, Kim would sometimes invite her in for a glass of white wine. Despite their many differences, the women had forged a bond. Lisa was a New Agey single mom who worked sporadically and lived with her only daughter in an apartment on Potrero's South Slope—not in the housing projects, but still, a far less affluent hood than the Sanders inhabited. Kim had wanted to expose her children to diversity; that's why she sent them to a private school with a robust scholarship program. She had set a good example by befriending someone outside her socioeconomic status. Noblesse oblige.

"Lisa . . . It's been ages."

"I know! Now that the girls are so independent, I never get to see you."

Kim scanned Lisa's long, wavy hair and sun-kissed skin. She was only a few years younger than Kim, but Lisa's style was bohemian, hip, almost adolescent. . . . Kim's Tory Burch tunic and ballet flats suddenly seemed matronly in comparison. "You look great."

"I've been surfing. My new guy, Allan, is really into it. He's a chef, so he's really creative and intense. But he's also very physi-

cal”—Lisa leaned in, touched Kim’s arm—“if you know what I mean. . . .”

Kim did. She raised her eyebrows and forced an impressed smile, but she felt uncomfortable. It was too much, too intimate . . . and also served to highlight that Kim and Jeff hadn’t had sex in nearly a year.

“But I’ll get down to business in May. I’m starting a Reiki healing and therapeutic-touch course.”

“Good,” Kim said as convincingly as she could. Lisa had made some smart real estate investments in the past, but was *Reiki healing* really the best skill to acquire in this economy? And was *therapeutic touch* Lisa’s plan to put her daughter through college? Though Ronni had never seemed particularly academic. . . .

That’s when Kim remembered the main reason her friendship with Lisa had never flourished. Lisa was a flake. A nut. A kook. Kim knew that Lisa had had a difficult life, and she sympathized. But Lisa was just so *out there*. Kim was grounded. Solid. Practical. When their daughters had drifted apart, so had their mothers. But now Ronni was back in Hannah’s social circle.

“Ronni’s coming to Hannah’s party tonight, right?”

“She can’t wait. It’s so nice that the girls have reconnected.”

“It is.” Kim was lying. Even when Ronni was little, Kim had found her precocious toward adults and domineering over sweet-natured Hannah: a typical only child of a single parent. Now that Ronni was sixteen, she seemed worldly and jaded, affecting that bored, disdainful attitude so popular with teenagers these days.

“Scuse me. . . .” The bakery girl interrupted them. “Do you want writing on the cake?” Coincidentally, the teen reminded Kim

of Ronni: thick, dewy foundation; precisely painted-on eyebrows; long, spidery lashes; and pale, glossy lips. These girls were like dolls . . . sexy dolls. It was disturbing.

Kim asked Lisa, "Will the girls think it's babyish if I get 'Happy Sixteenth' on the cake?"

"No, it's cute. They may act too cool for school, but they're still little girls at heart."

Kim smiled and squeezed Lisa's hand. She was a flake but a sweet flake. "It's good to see you. We should have coffee some time."

"I'd love that."

As Kim strolled back to the car, the cake box weighed heavy in her hands. She suddenly felt fragile, drained of energy, and far older than forty-six. She was glad she'd bumped into Lisa—they were still friends despite the passing years and their many differences—but Kim's life suddenly seemed incredibly mundane. Lisa was training for a new career, she had a new man in her bed, she was *surfing*. . . . Nothing remotely exciting had happened in Kim's orbit since they'd bought the house . . . unless she counted the *incident* last year, which she was not going to. There was excitement and then there was disaster, plain and simple.

She placed the cake box in the hatchback of her car and checked her watch. Hannah would sleep until noon at least; she had some time to kill. She considered going for a facial but she'd had one last week and if she went too often her skin broke out. A mani-pedi was a possibility, but she hadn't brought any flip-flops with her. She paused for just a moment before pulling out her phone and dialing. Her heart hammered in her chest as she listened to it ring.

“Tony Hoyle.” His voice, as always, prompted that delicious shiver.

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Hey, Kim.” His voice was professional—overly so. Ruby and Declan were obviously within earshot . . . maybe even his wife. “How’s the copy coming along?”

“I’m having a little trouble, actually.” She realized she was blushing and sweating, so unaccustomed was she to playing this game. But there was something so wonderfully naughty about it. “I thought maybe we could get together and brainstorm a bit.”

“That should work. Where and what time?”

“Umm . . . now. At Farley’s.”

“Great. I’ll bring the files on my laptop and we’ll get this sorted out.” He hung up.

As Kim pulled away from the parking meter, she allowed herself a gleeful smile. Just like that, she was back in eighth grade.