



THE *a novel by* Ryan LaSala

HONEYYS

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*Ryan
LaSala*

PUSH

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TO THE GIRLS WHO TOOK ME IN
WHEN THE BOYS KICKED ME OUT

We came as one and left as many.
We came with nothing and left with everything.

—ANONYMOUS CAMPER,
ASPEN SUMMER ACADEMY, 1923



I



CHAPTER 1

My sister wakes me with a whisper.

“I love you, Mars.” Her voice crumbles in her throat. In the moonlight from my window I can see the gleam of tears streaked over her jaw. She hovers so close I can smell her. Not her usual shampoo, but an unright odor. The rich sweetness of decay, like molding flowers.

“Caroline? You’re back?” I’m confused. The summer night swells with cricket song and the curtains billow against her hunched form, like the outside is trying to take her back. I used to leave that window open all the time when we still snuck out onto the balcony connecting our bedrooms. On nights like tonight, I used to wait for Caroline to *tap tap tap* on the glass, a book and a flashlight ready. But Caroline and I haven’t met on our balcony in a long, long time.

It’s her, though. Only Caroline would know I still keep the window unlocked, just in case.

“Caroline?” I ask the shadow. The overripe stink.

No answer.

“Why are you home?” I’m too sleepy to hide the hope in my voice. Despite everything from this past year, I’m happy to see my sister. I’ve waited so long for her to come back for me.

She lifts something above her head. I recognize the shape, the catch of soft moonlight on rough metal. It’s my iron sundial. She must have grabbed it from my bookcase. I use it as a bookend because it’s so heavy.

She stifles a sob, heaving the sundial high. I reach for my phone on the nightstand.

“Caroline, what’s going on—”

“Forgive me,” she sobs.

Caroline brings the sundial down on my hand, crushing nail and bone into metal and glass. I’m about to scream when she lifts it again, and this time she brings it down on my head.

Pink lights.

Pink walls.

The blood in my eye turns the clean brightness of the upstairs hallway into a rosy nightmare as I run from my room. From crashing and chaos.

I am slow and I am stumbling. I cradle one hand with the other, feeling familiar skin bent into unfamiliar carnage. The knuckles of my hands don’t match anymore, their twin-hood out of alignment. Like Caroline and me.

She storms behind me. She’s so close her stink overwhelms me. All I can hear is her screaming.

Mars. Mars. Don’t go. Don’t go.

It’s not her voice. It’s not my sister. It’s something wearing her skin, filling her flailing body like a pressurized water hose. She overtakes me before I’ve made it to the stairs, and the pink world whirls as we hit the floor. Upside down, I see the door to our parents’ room open, see Mom in her nightshirt halt. Gasp. Scream. Dad calls up from downstairs.

I barely dodge the next hit, the iron sundial smashing into the floorboards beside my head. I blindly drive a hand upward into a slippery jaw and the sundial tumbles away, down the stairs with gunshot thuds. My vision is fucked up, but in the brightness of the hallway I can see Caroline now. She is filthy, her brown hair clumped with dust and debris. Her clothes cling to her, black with mud, but the plastic Academy logo still shines on her uniform’s sleeve. She pulls something from her waistband and holds it over us.

A knife. My sister has brought home a knife.

But what scares me more are her eyes. Later, I will try to convince myself that there was no sign of my sister in that wild stare. But my dreams will replay this moment with cruel clarity; trap me within it like a bug preserved in amber. I will want to believe I am being killed by a monster, but in the stare of my attacker I don't see monstrosity. I see my Caroline. Lucid. Herself. So recognizable that my agony—even my shock—dissolves into relief. This is the first time since this awful year began that I've looked into her eyes and seen her—seen *her*—looking back.

Caroline cringes, and it's all the warning I have before she plunges the knife toward my face. I twist but a seam of fire rips open in my ear. Now I scream, but I can't hear it, can't hear anything through the white-hot pain. I feel the house tremble under my back as Dad hits the top of the stairs. I feel Caroline get dragged away. I roll to my side and use my good hand to heave myself onto the banister. I stare into the chandelier that hangs into the great drop of our entryway. The lights are still pink, the world still blurry. The whole house spins beneath me like I'm the center of an unbalanced carousel.

I am powerless as I watch Caroline kick and bite at our dad. Not Caroline. Not our dad. Strangers. Actors. Unreal characters that have broken into my life for this improvised horror. Mom stands in her doorway, another imposter. She claps both hands over her mouth, frozen. I want to scream at her. Want her to help. To fix this.

Caroline sinks teeth into the meat of Dad's hand. He's a big man; he flings her off with violent disgust, driving her into the mirror at the top of the stairs. The glass shatters over her, but she never stops moving. Not for a second. She plunges toward me, the carpet twisting beneath her shoes as she tries to get her footing. But she's too close, too out of control. I know what will happen before it happens.

Caroline trips. She falls into me, arms hugged tight around my shoulders. The banister snaps and we hurtle backward. Then down. The ceiling

fills my view. We fall through the chandelier; then the chandelier is falling with us. Like dancers, we spin in the brief infinity of the drop, a storm of light and crystal and blood.

When we hit the floor, Caroline hits first.

She breaks beneath my body. I'm close enough to hear her snap, to feel her stiffen, and to know she's gone too still. I am wrapped in her arms, her hair, in the sweet stink she brought home. The silence and the stillness scare me more than anything else.

I struggle free, broken crystal biting flesh from my naked thighs, my knees. In the wreckage, I stand.

I look at my sister.

She's covered in my blood. Her body curls into itself. Her face is the last thing to stop twitching. One eye half-lidded, the other flung wide open like a doll.

Caroline is looking at me when she dies. And she is smiling.

CHAPTER 2

When we were five years old, Caroline gave me a little pink calculator.

It was shaped like a cat and had candy-bright buttons. She liked it, but I loved it, and she loved me, so it became mine. Growing up, she was always like that. Generous and maybe a little too insightful about what people wanted. I played with that calculator endlessly, and when I lost it, she surprised me with a new one. It was our dad's accounting calculator, stolen from his desk, and because she was Caroline, she'd drenched the buttons in sticky pink nail polish. Just for me.

Caroline got in trouble, and I got a hobby. She gave me lots of strange devices after that, and I bought her every color of nail polish I could find. It was our joke. One year it was an old-school abacus in exchange for neons. Then the sundial for thermosensitive metallics. And finally, my favorite: a 1987 Mayfair Sound Products calculator, made in Japan. A blocky device bigger than my hand. Pleasantly heavy, with noisy buttons. And all I gave her was royal blue. Painfully inadequate, but she wore that color all the time, even after we stopped talking.

In the aftermath of Caroline's attack, I find the Mayfair at the very bottom of my room's wreckage. It is utterly smashed. Ruined. But what gets me—what finally shocks me out of my stupor—is a perfect, bloody fingerprint on the device's one unscathed corner. She must have picked it up, considered it, and put it back before reaching for the sundial to wake me.

I don't understand why. I don't need to understand why. I sob as I sift through the mess and, searching for each piece, I learn something.

Death isn't the end of a life, but the division of it. When someone dies, their soul scatters into all the things they've ever given away. Love. Bruises.

Gifts. You struggle to piece together what's left—even the things that hurt—just to feel haunted.

It takes me until sunrise to find every broken bit of the Mayfair calculator. The house is quiet by then, Mom and Dad with the body at the hospital. I face the pieces alone, laid out on my desk in the weak morning light. There's the brushed metal frame, the popped-out buttons, the emerald guts of circuitry veined in copper. Cleaning the grime off was the easy part. Now I'm trying to figure out how this goes back together. If it goes back together at all.

I don't know how anything in so many pieces could go back together.

Caroline is dead.

My sister is dead.

There are no pieces, no parts, that can be assembled to make sense of the absence my sister has become. There is just a sudden, shocking emptiness where her life used to be.

I try to count the voids. To trace their shapes. When a person dies, you do this. You try to account for what's gone. Some of what's missing will be clear right away. The missing sound of their voice, or the to-do lists they'll never complete, or the new blankness that sits in their chair at breakfast. Those I'm ready for.

But so much worse are the small, infuriatingly small gaps—really just pinprick holes—that Caroline leaves everywhere else. Emptiness, fired through my memories like buckshot, so scattered that I can't quantify what's gone. I can't count it. I can't measure it.

My sister becomes a constellation of voids.

And, like the broken calculator, I'm incapable of adding it all up, of making any kind of sense out of it. So I sit at my desk, for days and days. And I stare at the pieces floating in the muted light of each sunrise. Bent metal, plastic buttons, emerald guts, copper veins. Pieces, parts of a former whole.

But now all I see is the new emptiness that separates them.

When I fear something, I study it. Caroline would dance about it or probably write a poem. Something dreamy and creative. But I'm our logical half. A killjoy, but smart. Our necessary evil—we used to joke growing up—as our joint fears pushed Caroline toward art, and me toward research. Toward data and science. Maybe even an anecdotal account from a primary source, if I got desperate.

No one will talk with me about what happened. I become desperate.

So I research death.

I learn about sky burials and water burials. I watch videos of dances and parades, and even ashes being turned into fistfuls of beautiful blue-green beads. I learn about the Jewish custom of covering mirrors so that a mourner's contemplations reach inward, not outward.

I cover my mirrors, too, but it's because every time I see myself, I see her. I glimpse her final, twitching grin, like a translucent film laid over my own face. Our face. We're twins. Not identical, but close enough.

We are twins.

We *were* twins, I guess.

That happens, too, according to my research. When someone dies, suddenly you've made an enemy of the past tense, but the past tense is all you've got now and it feels like it knows it.

Well. Fuck the past tense, I guess.

Oh, and also: Fuck the upstairs banister. After that night, I avoided even looking at the splintered breach where Caroline and I fell. Then one morning I woke up to men in boots bounding up and down the stairs, and suddenly it was fixed. That was somehow worse. An ugly feeling burned in me when I put my hands over the new wood, something like betrayal. I didn't get why, but it's that same ugly feeling that I feel now, a week later, only eight days after Caroline fell to her death in our home, as I watch a truck pull up our driveway to deliver a brand-new chandelier.

I watch the men hoist the crystal sculpture into place. And as I watch it rise, I think, *As far as death rituals go, Caroline would've loved this. The drama alone.*

Not the chandelier, but the fact that our parents couldn't go two weeks without replacing it despite the death of their daughter. Same with the banister. I should commend them for even going a day, but then I look up chandeliers online. This one is custom, the kind of shit you have to pull a string to get in less than six weeks. As the installation team turns it on, I force myself to look directly into its cold, bright guts.

When our parents ordered their new chandelier, was their daughter even officially dead?

My mind answers in Caroline's airy voice.

Probably not, Mars, she laughs.

We hold the funeral in our home a day after the new chandelier goes up.

Like all things with my family, the funeral is a careful performance of obfuscation. It's the Matthias family way. Mom's a New York senator, after all, so it's all of our jobs to keep up appearances. Our lives are beholden to the public eye, and I guess that means our deaths are, too.

As family and friends enter, there will be no sign of what happened here. The crystal has been swept up, the debris vacuumed away, the blood scrubbed from the grout. I secretly think Mom and Dad planned the funeral around the chandelier's delivery, and not the other way around. It radiates a joyful warmth, boasting that there's nothing to hide and, even if there was, there's nowhere to hide it. The light fills every corner of our spacious colonial mansion, which has been bedecked with calla lilies; poster-huge photographs of Caroline, fresh from Staples; and a sweet perfume from the beeswax candles Caroline loved to burn.

What attempted murder? What accidental suicide? Not in this Lovely American Home. Here, enjoy a canapé, why don't you?

“Mars, sweetie?” Mom calls from inside the house, and it barely reaches me outside on my balcony. The same one Caroline crawled over to get into my window. I’m hiding out here, fiddling with the still-busted Mayfair calculator. “Mars? Are you up?”

I climb inside. I’m supposed to help direct the catering staff during setup, and later I’m on welcoming duty at the front door. *Welcome! Come on in. Drinks are that way; the body of my sister is over there. The reenactment starts at four o’clock, don’t be late!*

Officially, Caroline did not die in our house. She died two days later, in the hospital, when it became clear she wouldn’t wake up. When the doctors scanned her, they found a milky mass in her brain, and we all learned a new word: *glioblastoma*. The tumor accounted for her “uncharacteristic behavior,” said the doctors. Her death was inevitable, coming for her no matter what, once that thing took root. In a way, the swiftness of her death could be seen as a mercy.

They said that. But they didn’t know about the attack. No one does, and no one will unless I tell them. Dad took me to a twenty-four-hour urgent care center somewhere outside Westchester County while Mom rode in the ambulance with Caroline. Dad answered questions for me while they checked out my hand and swabbed blood from my hair.

Officially, I was crushed by my bookcase. Dad was ready with the lie when the physician’s assistant asked. When they asked me again in private, just me and the PA, I said, “I know I look bad, but you should see the bookcase.”

Like I said: a performance of obfuscation. And without Caroline here, I’m now unquestionably the lead. I hate it. Our duet has become my solo. For all my sardonic theatricality, I never wanted this stage to myself. It’ll be like this for the rest of my life. I wonder if it will ever not feel like its own form of death.

It certainly feels like death today.

A million times during setup I stop to look for her among the staff filling our house with chairs and tables; filling the tables with pastries and cut fruit. A million times I don't find her, and I shiver when I remember that she's in the one room I refuse to enter: the parlor, transformed with drawn shades and dimmed lighting, an entire wall crowded with tribute bouquets from everywhere—from school, from the hospital, even from Aspen. And at the center of the arrangement, a casket of polished cherrywood.

"She would have loved this," Mom actually said as the coffin was being dragged in through the solarium. The same thing I thought when I watched the chandelier rise like a cold sun. I was being sarcastic, the language Caroline and I shared behind our parents' backs. Mom is being sincere.

She would have loved this.

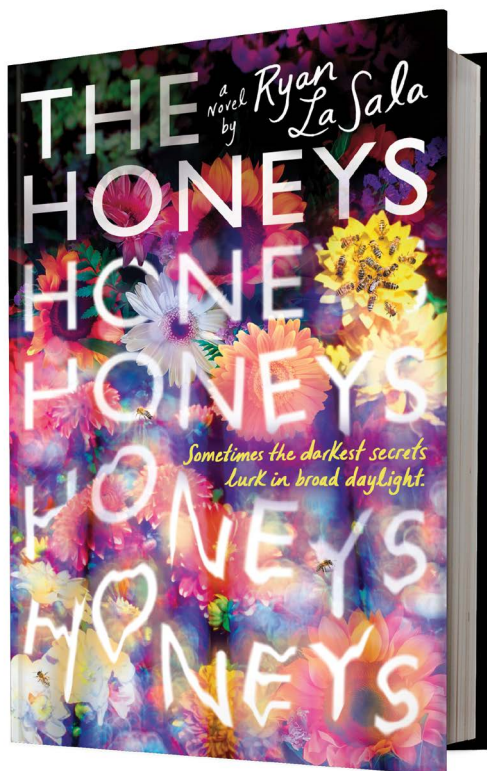
As if Caroline spent countless hours vision-boarding her big day. Her "Celebration of Life," which is printed on the programs in big, loopy letters.

Caroline would've hated all this—the performance, the programs—but especially the term *Celebration of Life*. Caroline was a highly accomplished seventeen-year-old, but she was seventeen years old. There is very little life to celebrate, certainly not enough to go around. In my mind, I joke to her that there's nothing more gothic than a celebration that hinges on the guest of honor being dead, and she says, *Mars, please, don't make me laugh.*

And I remember the way she laughed.

I stop talking to her after that.

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